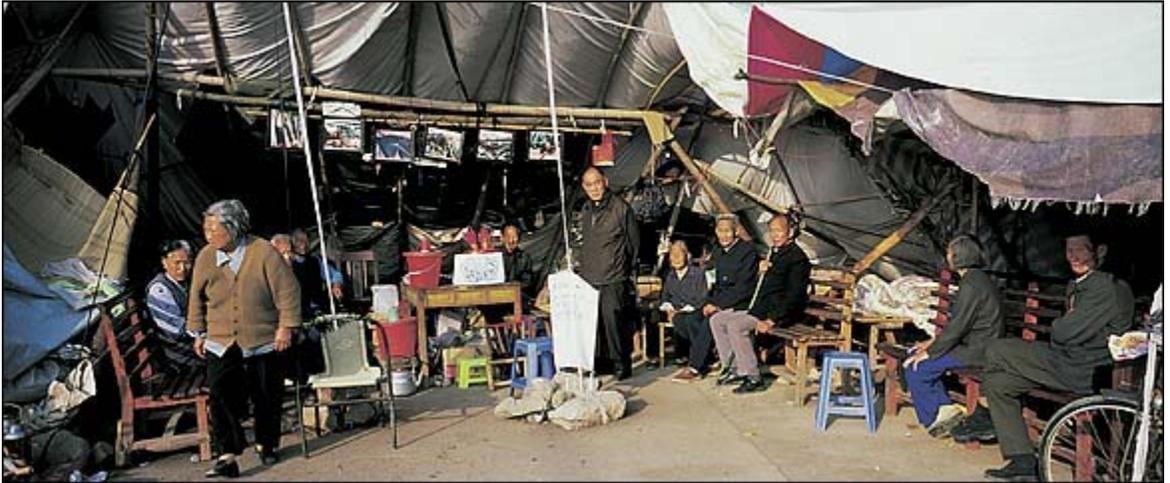


China's New Frontiers: Tests of Democracy and Dissent



Du Bin for The New York Times

When Dongyang gave land to chemical plants, villagers built shelters to block the roads, and lived in them.

By **HOWARD W. FRENCH**

Published: June 19, 2005

ZEGUO, China - With his smart clothes, blow-dried hair and speech peppered with references to Rousseau, Voltaire and Montesquieu, Jiang Zhaohua, the young Communist Party secretary for this prosperous township, bears little resemblance to the usual Chinese politician.

Under his leadership, Mr. Jiang's township of 110,000 people recently embarked on a novel experiment in governance, allowing citizens' preferences to determine, after detailed consultations over the pros and cons, which major projects will go ahead, and how their money will be spent.

"Our original manner was the government deciding everything, only announcing the results afterward to the people," Mr. Jiang said candidly, with a sharp sweep of his arm to suggest official high-handedness. "We never got to know the public's opinion. It was 20 people sitting in a room who decided everything."

The downside of that method, common in China, has been a lack of transparency, runaway corruption and in recent years an explosion of sometimes violent unrest in townships and villages. Angered by abuses of power, rural Chinese, networking even in the countryside via cellphone and computer, have been taking matters into their own hands.

In fact, the starkest contrast to Zeguo might be Dongyang, a city a few hours down the road in the same coastal province, Zhejiang.

This spring, after local officials simply handed 163 acres of land to 13 private and state-owned chemical plants, the displaced farmer-tenants set up roadblocks around the plants. An estimated 30,000 villagers fought off more than 1,000 riot policemen. Many people were injured; the plants were idled.

[In the most recent dispute over land use, 22 people were arrested over an attack on village residents in Dingzhou, a city in Hebei Province, Agence France-Presse said, quoting state press reports on Saturday. On June 11, up to 300 thugs had descended there to force out villagers who refused to make way for a new power plant. Six farmers were killed and 51 wounded in the clash.]

Although he would not discuss Dongyang's problems, Mr. Jiang said he had drawn a firm conclusion from the spread of violent conflicts. And although he insisted he was not meaning to lecture, his words sounded like a neat coda to the last century in China, a period marked by catastrophic policy blunders like the Great Leap Forward.

"No matter how smart we are, we officials have limited information," he said. "The easiest way to avoid mistakes is by having more democratic decisions."

Zeguo's political experiment involved the polling of 257 randomly chosen people, and was conducted in large part on the advice of a Stanford University political scientist, James S. Fishkin, who was brought in as a consultant. After lengthy briefings on the pros and cons of a long list of potential municipal projects, the electors showed a decided preference for environmental works, including sewage treatment plants and public parks.

If unique in form, Zeguo's experiment takes place against a backdrop of a broad effervescence of democratic ideas bubbling up into local politics all over China.

By one estimate, there will be 300,000 village committee elections in China's 18

provinces this year alone. In many areas, officials are making efforts to involve ordinary citizens in local decision making.

"The experiments taking place here and there are very meaningful, because China's economic reforms began the same way," said Li Fan, director of the World and China Institute, a nongovernmental institute in Beijing that studies electoral reform. "The central government didn't know how to carry them out, so it relied on local governments."

Mr. Li said, however, that the most important breakthrough would come when the already existing assemblies - local, provincial and national groups known as people's congresses - were given a real say, instead of meeting one day a year, as is typical, to endorse the government's decisions. "The Communist Party doesn't want this, because they are afraid the congresses will criticize the government," Mr. Li said. "They prefer a rubber stamp."

In Dongyang today, the villagers would seem to have prevailed against the chemical factories, which they say have ruined the area's land and water. They smashed 14 government cars and 40 buses by one account; as many as 30 policemen were reported hospitalized and a handful of villagers were injured.

Most of the villagers who took part were older. The younger people, fearing arrest, stayed away, and today go about their lives. It is the older villagers who continue to man their makeshift roadblocks, preventing access to the plants.

"We have no other means," said a man in his 70's, dressed in rough blue farmer's breeches and standing guard recently under the straw and bamboo roadblock. He declined to give his name. The government, he said, "wants tax revenue, and if the money is big enough, people's health can be ignored."

Another man, in his 60's and wearing an old brown suit, offered this assessment: "The government always deceives us. They say they'll move the factories away today; tomorrow they say they'll close them. Ordinary folks don't believe in government."