Since China implemented the policy of reform and opening to the outside world, there have been two most conspicuous changes in China’s rural areas: economically, the implementation of the household contract responsibility system with remuneration linked to output; politically, the institution of self-governance among villagers. Self-governance among villagers has been introduced to most of China’s rural areas since the 1980s (hereinafter referred to as the Reforms). This has brought about a fundamental change in the entire rural political life, and a new model of governance is emerging in China’s rural areas. Sociologists and political scientists have conducted a great deal of research and obtained many results. However, some difficulties concerning theory and practice arise in the reform of rural governance centring on self-governance among villagers. For example, what is the model for China’s rural governance? What are its features? What is the status of self-governance among villagers in the political development of the whole country? What are the main difficulties and the future for the reform of rural democracy and governance? How about relations between self-governance and the Party’s leadership? How can villagers be mobilized to take an active part in government and political affairs? Is it possible to make a shift from direct elections for village heads to direct elections for township and town heads?

1 This article is the general report of the Project supported by the Ford Foundation—“China’s Rural Governance in the 1920–1930s and 1980–1990s: A Comparative Analysis of the Cases of Dingxian County, Zouping County and Jiangning County,” co-authored with Xu Xiuli. In addition to other relevant literature, the report is mainly based on the following sub-reports: “Rural Governance of Dingxian County during the Period of the Republic of China” by Li Defang, “Rural Governance of Zouping County during the Period of the Republic of China” by Zhuang Weimin, “Rural Governance of Jiangning County during the Period of the Republic of China” by Ma Junya, “Current Rural Governance of Dingxian County” by Wang Fengming, “Current Rural Governance of Zouping County” by Wang Zhenhai and “Current Rural Governance of Jiangning County” by Jin Taijun.
Historical inquiry often helps to solve such problems.

Reform of governance, namely the rural self-governance movement, was introduced to China’s rural areas during the Republican period (1911–1949), originating from the self-governance of Zhaicheng Village, Dingxian County, Zhili Province (now Dingzhou City, Hebei Province). During the 1920s, Yan Xishan’s village governance experiment in Shanxi would provide an example. After the Nationalist Government had been established in Nanjing (1927), local self-governance was regarded as a central task of political construction, in accordance with Dr. Sun Yat-sen’s Three People’s Principles, but the results were not gratifying. As of 1932, the Nanjing Government began to support counties experimenting with self-governance. After hostilities with Japan erupted in 1936, a new system was implemented in Nationalist (Guomindang)-controlled counties. The government tightened control over the grassroots units, so that the spirit of rural self-governance was distorted. Reform of rural governance became a mere formality in most areas and produced no permanent results, but it played a positive role in stabilizing rural society, promoting economic development and raising the quality of villagers, at least in some places. There is a keen scholarly interest in research on rural reform experiments.

Such early research is of great practical use but, regrettably, no systematic, in-depth study comparing reforms after and prior to 1949 has been carried out. Our research is designed to make up for this lacuna. Its purpose is thus to conduct a comparative analysis of the rural self-governance movements under the leadership of the Guomindang and of the Communist Party of China (CCP) respectively. In analyzing basic operating mechanisms, discovering similarities and differences, generalizations can be made through historical comparison, suggesting solutions concerning rural democracy and governance today.

We chose Dingxian, Zouping and Jiangning counties as case studies mainly because the three counties were influential model areas within the rural self-governance movement. Furthermore, most original docu-

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3 See Teachings about Local Self-governance by the Prime Minister, Words on Local Self-governance by the President, County Management Draft Committee, Executive Yuan, Zhengzhong Book Company, 1941 and 1940.