Abstract

How do candidates buy votes in China’s village elections? Based on 2013 fieldwork in 14 villages in a coastal province, this study shows that candidates generally pursue three forms of vote buying: offering cash, making promises of state benefits and hiring local brokers. While these three forms fulfill different functions and fit into different situations, they collectively indicate that China’s village elections have become more diversified and complicated than previously. But why would vote buying only occur in some villages but not in others? Or under what circumstances are candidates more likely to pursue vote buying? I argue that such decisions are closely associated with whether there is a potential for land sales in the village because it affects the scale of economic return accessible to winning candidates. In other words, in villages where land is more likely to be sold after the election, candidates are more likely to pursue vote buying because they anticipate obtaining higher economic returns. Based on this finding, this paper suggests that candidates are attracted to village leadership by the potential economic benefits, and that their campaign strategies are thus determined by their estimation of these benefits.
Introduction

Village K is a small, poor village in a coastal province of China. Like most other villages, it holds elections every three years to select village leaders, but only a few villagers have been interested in running for office. Being the leader of a poor village means not only having limited resources to complete assigned tasks (while possibly being punished for failure to do so), but also not receiving a stable salary, despite having to carry heavier burdens than leaders from richer villages do. Thus, even if a few villagers occasionally take an interest in running for office, they never spend much time or money on campaigning. The most they tend do is merely “da zhaohu [打招呼],” meaning politely ask people to vote for them without presenting anything. However, in a village nearby and likewise poor, village J, the election presents a completely different story. In its 2008 election, two candidates not only tried to buy villagers’ votes with cash, but even competed to outbid each other: when one candidate offered villagers 300 Yuan (about $45) for each vote, the other candidate quickly responded by offering a higher price of 400 Yuan (about $60). Furthermore, both candidates spent a lot of money hiring “brokers,” known in local areas as “la zhuang [拉壮],” individuals who are seen as “experts” in buying villagers’ votes. In the end, it is estimated that the candidate who won the election had paid over 500,000 Yuan to both villagers and brokers.

Both stories originate from my fieldwork in China during 2013, and what candidates did in village J is commonly known as “vote buying”. To many western scholars, vote buying is seen as a market exchange between politicians and voters.¹ In

other words, “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”. However, even though village K and village J were from the same area
and shared similar economic conditions, vote buying only occurred in one of them. So
why did vote buying only occur in village J but not in village K?

In fact, in recent years, scholars have noticed that vote buying is rapidly
spreading throughout China’s rural areas. As Kennedy has pointed out, “over the last
decade, reports of vote buying have steadily increased, especially after the year 2000”. Nevertheless, while many villages’ elections are just like village J’s, where candidates
compete with each other to buy villagers’ votes, many elections are similar to village K,
where candidates are barely interested in spending any money to be elected. In a speech
given in 2011, the vice minister of the Ministry of Civil Affairs claimed that while vote
buying in village elections would require “highly special attention” from the government,
it still occurred only in a “minority” of areas. In other words, vote buying is still a rare
phenomenon in most villages today. But if this is the case, the general question we need
to ask is, why does vote buying occur in some villages but not others, as described in
village J versus K? Further, if we believe vote buying is quickly developing, how do

Lehoucq, Fabrice. "When Does a Market for Votes Emerge." In Elections for Sale: The Causes and
Consequences of Vote Buying, edited by Frederic Charles Schaffer, 33-46. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner
Consequences of Vote Buying. Edited by Frederic Charles Schaffer. Boudler, CO: Lynne Rienner
accessed July 10, 2016
candidates actually pursue vote buying? What strategies and tactics do they adopt? Addressing these questions comprises the central focus of this study.

Based on fieldwork in 14 villages in a coastal province in 2013, this paper illustrates that candidates generally make use of three strategies to buy villagers’ votes: offering cash, making promises of state benefits, and hiring election brokers. These three strategies have different functions and are thus suitable to different situations. But under what circumstances are candidates more likely to pursue vote buying? I argue that the answer is closely tied to whether there is land for sale in the villages, because land sales affect candidates’ scale of economic return upon winning the elections. That is to say, in villages where land is more likely to be sold after the election, candidates are more likely to pursue vote buying because they could receive more economic profits if they win. Based on this argument, this paper further suggests that villagers are attracted to running for village leadership positions by the potential economic gains of holding such posts, and that their campaign strategies are therefore determined by their estimations of the extent of those economic profits.

To illustrate these arguments, the paper will be divided into three sections: the first section will provide a general introduction to China’s village elections and vote buying, while also talking about the selection of the fourteen villages in the fieldwork; the second section will discuss the three forms of vote buying and show how candidates pursue them; and the last section explains how candidates’ decisions on vote buying are affected by land sales and how they could receive huge potential economic profits from it.

**Background**
Village Elections and Vote Buying in China

China’s village elections were not fully implemented until 1998 through the launch of the Organic Law of Village Committees. Despite some radical debates and struggles that took place among (and between) China’s central and local leadership about whether villagers should be granted the power to elect their own village leaders (instead of being appointed by local government), China’s top leaders eventually agreed to spread it to the entire rural areas after first experiments it in some places starting in late 1980s.\(^5\) According to the law, all villages should hold elections every three years to elect the members of the village committee, who will be responsible for jobs such as “managing public affairs” and “helping maintain public order.”\(^6\) In other words, the law has granted villagers the autonomy and freedom to elect their own village leaders who will be in charge of most village affairs.

The law also regulates how the elections should be held. First, each village establishes an election committee comprised of 5 to 7 people who are responsible for running the election, and every eligible villager needs to register with the committee to become an “official” voter. Second, the committee holds a primary election to decide the candidate list. A threshold is set after the election, and whoever receives a number of votes higher than the threshold point will be named on the candidate list. The committee then sends the list to the local government for approval and posts it on village’s public board. If neither the government nor villagers oppose it, the committee announces the final list and the election date. On the election day, all registered voters vote from this list.

\(^6\) Article 2, Organic Law of Village Committee
through a secret-ballot method, and whoever receives more than half the total votes will be announced as the new village leader.\footnote{7}

Not surprisingly, having noted that “democratic” elections were now carried out in China, many western scholars became excited at what some of them regarded it as a milestone for China’s democracy. Thus, since the late 1990s, researchers have started to study village elections from different perspectives, focusing particularly on how they could affect villagers’ opinions toward government and democracy,\footnote{8} how they could shape the way the party governs rural areas,\footnote{9} and what factors might encourage villagers to vote.\footnote{10} However, after a few years, some scholars started to realize that the elections might not be as “democratic” as had been assumed. That is, not only are elections often manipulated by the local governments, but even when cadres are indeed elected by villagers, they still face many constraints that render them virtually powerless, such as the existence of the village’s party branch and frequent interventions from the local

\footnote{7} Article 10 to 15
governments. To make matter worse, some local governments have put even more severe pressure on these cadres by taking away their financial power in recent years.

These constraints have thus made people eventually realize that the party’s priority is still to keep rural areas under its control. And as a result, scholars have become generally pessimistic about the future of village elections.

Despite this generally negative attitude among scholars, some scholars have also noticed that, from the villagers’ perspective, the elections have changed significantly since their inception. Interestingly, one of these changes is the rapid spread of vote buying in recent years. Even though no official numbers can be found on the incidence of vote buying in village elections, scholars at large have noticed that vote buying is becoming far more common. Just as Kennedy points out, “over the last decade, reports of vote buying have steadily increased, especially after the year 2000”. Also, a study conducted by the World and China Institute (a think-tank that focuses heavily on China’s grassroots democracy) has reported a steady increase of vote buying since the early 2000s. Further, as vote buying became more severe, it had drawn attention from the government. The Ministry of Civil Affairs’ 2008 report specifically mentioned that “vote

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14 Ibid, p. 618

buying had gradually developed with the implementation of village elections.”\textsuperscript{16} And in 2011, the vice minister pointed out that vote buying in rural areas needed to be paid “highly special attention [gaodu zhongshi]” and be dealt with using “effective solutions [youxiaocuoshi].”\textsuperscript{17}

Meanwhile, not only has vote buying become far more common, but also its costs have sharply increased. In a BBC article on village elections in 2010, the reporter noted: “In China the cost of bribing a voter in a grassroots election can be more than 100 times greater than it used to be.”\textsuperscript{18} Indeed, the cost of pursuing vote buying could sometimes be so high that it is even more expensive than running for governor in other countries. For example, in a small village in Shandong Province, the winner of the 2013 election was accused of spending over 8 million Yuan on vote buying.\textsuperscript{19} In another village from Zhejiang Province during the same year, a candidate offered voters as much as 10,000 Yuan for each vote.\textsuperscript{20} One of the most famous events was a TV show presented by China Business News on Shanxi’s village elections of 2014, which quoted many local officials saying, such as “they (village cadres) could win because they spent a large amount of money on elections: the minimum was several million while the maximum was more than 10 million” and “many cadres had to borrow a lot of money to buy votes.” Such show has not only attracted great attention from public and media, but also forced


the Shanxi government to start an investigation.\textsuperscript{21} Apparently, this was not imaginable when elections were implemented twenty years ago.

But how should this affect our understanding of village elections? In fact, if we rely on scholars’ general opinion on village elections, we would perhaps expect to see a decline in vote buying, as if the party has been trying to constrain village cadres’ power, villagers should become less interested in running for office. Under such circumstances, they would have an incentive to avoid high-cost, risky strategies like vote buying. However, what we have witnessed in reality is that vote buying has become an even more widespread, meaning that villagers have not lost much, or perhaps have generated even stronger interest in running for office. So why would this trend contradict scholars’ projections? Also, unlike many western scholars who argue that vote buying could harm a state’s institutions and economy,\textsuperscript{22} some scholars believe that vote buying may bring more positive impacts in China’s case. For example, Kennedy indicates that the spread of vote buying indicates that the power to determine the winner of the election has shifted from the party to villagers.\textsuperscript{23} But can we really draw such conclusions without understanding why and how vote buying has occurred in China? In other words, these questions are at best difficult to evaluate without first uncovering the candidates’ incentives and considerations. However, scholars studying China’s village elections have


\textsuperscript{23} Kennedy, ‘The Price of Democracy’. 
often skipped this step and have thus ignored a basic but important question: why and how do candidates pursue vote buying in rural China? This study aims to fill this gap by offering an explanation for this question.

*The Fourteen Villages*

Before we start our discussion on vote buying in China’s village elections, it should be noted that vote buying has always been regarded as a difficult topic to study.\(^{24}\) An important reason is that, because vote buying is often considered an illegal and immoral activity, most people might be reluctant to discuss it with researchers. Another reason is that candidates who pursue vote buying try to avoid leaving much evidence so that their opponents cannot attack them for it in the future. As Lehoucq points out, “simply put, no one who stuffs the ballot box wants to leave a trail of incriminating evidence”.\(^{25}\) And a result, “only a handful of papers exist on vote buying”.\(^{26}\)

Such a situation would of course apply to China’s village elections and might provide some explanation as to why scholars have so seldom published articles on China’s vote buying. Considering these difficulties, I therefore chose to locate my research in a county in which I developed an array of rich social connections during past years. This county locates in a coastal province in northern China, containing a total of 57 villages. It started to implement village elections as early as the late 1980s, so its long history of elections could help us to better observe the general development of China’s


\(^{26}\) Lehoucq, Fabrice. ‘Logistics: how to buy votes?’. P.33.
village elections as a whole. Also, this county is a middle-income county with an average annual income of 7963 Yuan for rural residences in 2008 (the year that this study focuses on), meaning that it was neither extremely rich nor extremely poor, which could help to avoid potential bias caused by level of economy.

For the sampling method, I choose to use snowball sampling. That is, I first interviewed a villager whom I knew quite well, then asked this villager to introduce one of his friends or any villager who would be willing to accept my interview. This method likewise provided me with a big advantage: since I was introduced by a friend or relative of almost all the interviewees, most of them were therefore willing to fully answer all my questions and sharing detailed stories with me. I also had two other advantages while conducting this research: first, since I had visited this county many times and become extremely familiar with its local history and conditions, many of interviewees considered me a half-local who could share their feelings and opinions; second, because myself used to live in a village during my childhood, it had not only equipped me with better communication skills among villagers, but also further shortened the distance between me and the interviewees, causing them to be more open and at ease with me.

I first started my research in villages that had about an average annual income and population size in local areas, assuming their elections would be more typical, and then I considered the possibility that vote buying could be affected by factors such as economy and population, so I picked several villages from each category (rich vs. poor, large vs. small) to control for these variables. In the end, I conducted research in a total of 14 villages and interviewed 5 to 8 people in each, which gave me a total number of 82 interviewees. A more detailed table that describes some basic information of the 14
villages is provided below, in which whether candidates pursued vote buying had also been recorded.

Two things need to be particularly pointed out before we interpret this result. First, even though the fieldwork was conducted in 2013, this study actually focus on their 2008 elections because most villages reported that vote buying only started to emerge from that time; second, despite the fact that all villages also hold another type of election, called the village’s party secretary election, this study only discuss the committee chairman election. This is because that while the party election is only for a very minority population of “party members” in the village, almost all candidates in the 14 villages who won the election for chairman also easily won the party election afterwards. This is known as “yijiantiao”, meaning that both the village’s committee chairman and party secretary are the same person.

But from Table 1, we can see that while there were six villages whose candidates pursued vote buying in 2008, there were also eight villages whose candidates did not pursue vote buying. So what strategies did they pursue? Interestingly, among three villages the candidates pursued scarcely any strategies. The reason was that in each of these villages, one highly powerful candidate frightened away any other potential candidates, making it unnecessary for him to pursue any strategies since he was the voters’ sole choice. There are two main situations in which a candidate may become such a dominating figure. First, as in village X, the sole candidate was the incumbent leader who had been in office since 1978 and was highly respected by almost all the villagers, so no villager would wish to compete with him. Second, as in villages G and F, each candidate was president of the village’s collective enterprise, which determined much of
the village’s economy but are usually appointed by the local government. Thus, even if a rival candidate were to win the election, his fate would still be controlled by this enterprise leader, making such a pursuit pointless. This situation aligns with Oi and Rozelle’s theory that elections would be less competitive in such villages because the leaders of their enterprises were just too powerful.27

In the other five villages, the candidates pursued some strategies, but most cost them only a limited amount of money. For example, in B and K villages, the candidates focused on a tactic called “greeting” (da zhao hu 打招呼), meaning that they would try to persuade others to vote for them by using their reputation and connections. Typically they would start a conversation with other villagers, and by the end of the conversation would ask something like, “By the way, have you thought about how you’re going to vote?” Even though these are “questions” about villagers’ opinions, interviewees explained that their real meaning is clearly, “I hope you will vote for me.”28 In addition, a candidate might use body language such as firmly shaking hands or gently punching others’ shoulders, meaning that he would expect them to vote for him. Interviewees pointed out that if these people had high reputations or close relations with them, they would usually respond with something along the lines of “Of course I’ll vote for you!” because they would not wish to offend them.29 So such a tactic relies primarily on candidates’ personal background and would not require them to pay any additional costs.

But if several candidates held similar reputations or connections, winning the competition might require persuasive campaign tactics. In some villages, candidates pursued strategies that might appear to constitute a form of vote buying, such as inviting

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27 Oi and Rozelle. ‘Elections and Power’.
28 Interviews, village K, Jan 2013.
29 Interviews, village B, Jan 2013.
villagers for meals or offering small gifts. For example, in Z village the candidates invited some villagers to their homes for a meal costing about 5 to 15 Yuan. And in Q village, the candidates presented villagers with small gifts such as milk, fruits or cigarettes. However, the reason these strategies are not considered vote buying is that they fall within the range of customs commonly observed by villagers in their daily lives and therefore do not seem created specifically for campaign purposes. In many places, villagers invite one another to dinner at their homes after farming simply to maintain their friendship, and they often give each other small gifts during festivals as a part of the traditional culture. During the interviews, villagers also explained that they considered these gifts as a “sign of virtue,” showing that the candidates were generous or respected them.30 This strategy resembles a common tactic in Taiwan elections, where “to give someone a gift is to give that person a face”.31 Further, this practice has also been supported by government statements. For example, when the head of the Department of Basic Governance and Community in the Ministry of Civil Affairs was asked in 2000 about whether “offering cigarettes or a small meal” could be counted as vote buying, his answer was “probably not”.32 However, if such behaviors are not counted as vote buying, then which are?

**Three Forms of Vote Buying**

*The Definition of Vote Buying*

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The most common definition of vote buying is as a simple market exchange between politicians and voters. Put simply, if a voter agrees to vote for a politician specifically because that politician offered him material benefits, the activity qualifies as vote buying. Such a definition would also align with the Chinese government and scholars’ understanding of vote buying. For example, the Chinese Election Law strictly prohibits candidates from “bribing a voter or deputy with money or other items.” Most Chinese scholars have adhered to this definition in their work. However, what remains unclear is what else, in addition to money, can be counted as vote buying? In fact, the government has not provided further instruction on how people should interpret it. The Organic Law mentions nothing except that candidates are prohibited from “bribing voters,” but what might be considered as “bribing” is never specified. As a consequence, much confusion persists in rural areas, – a situation which has caused many people to attribute the spread of vote buying to the ambiguity of the law.

Since the law does not spell out various forms of vote buying, Chinese scholars have had to classify different methods by themselves. Generally, they have identified three basic forms of vote buying: cash, promises of future state benefits, and immediate material rewards such as cigarettes or food. But while the first two forms have roused little debate, there is still great controversy about whether the third form can be counted as vote buying, with some scholars strongly insisting that small gifts should not be classified as vote buying. Considering that even Thomas Jefferson believed that small
gifts of food and drink should not be seen as vote buying, it is not unusual that such controversial still widely spread today. Based on this, as well as reasons provided earlier, in my fieldwork I did not consider these small gifts as a form of vote buying. But except for this form, my study of 14 villages did generate findings similar to those of previous studies. That is, candidates would indeed commonly use cash and promises of future state benefits to buy villagers’ votes. In addition, I found that candidates made use of another form of vote buying that has not been fully noticed, which is the practice of hiring local brokers to buy votes for them. As the following sections will explain, these three forms of vote buying not only have different function, but would also fit into different situations for candidates.

Cash, Promises, and Brokers

The most common form of vote buying was to directly purchase villagers’ votes with cash, which emerged in all six villages where vote buying occurred. This is not surprising since it is the most straightforward transaction: the candidates just simply hand money to villagers and ask for their votes. The price of a vote varies tremendously among villages. For example, the lowest price paid was 200 rmb per vote (S village), while the highest was 1000 rmb per vote (H village), with an average around 600 rmb per vote. However, in most situations, more than one candidate was offering villagers money. For example, a villager interviewed from village Y talked about how two candidates had tried to buy his vote at the same time:

It was about two weeks before the election when Qing (one of the candidates) suddenly came to visit me. He said that he wanted come to see me because he
hadn’t seen me for a while. So we chatted for about half an hour. But when he was about to leave, he took out a envelope and said that he would really appreciate it if I would vote for him. I tried to refuse it, but he just threw the bag on the table and quickly left. The bag contained 800 Yuan, and my family had four members who could vote. Several days later, the other candidate’s brother also came to visit me. He said stuff similar to what Qing had said and also gave me a bag. This bag contained 1200 Yuan.\(^{37}\)

Clearly, this example shows that candidates often face intense competition that requires them to carefully consider the price to offer. But if several offers came at the same time, how would villagers make their decision? This villager’s answer was that he accepted Hong’s offer, and he believed that most villagers would make the same decision. Indeed, in my other interviews, most villagers expressed a similar opinion, and one villager even told me an old story to explain villagers’ general attitude: many years ago when two people were competing for the leadership of production team, both presented an elderly women a chicken. Villagers then asked her how she would make her decision since she had received the same gift from both. She answered, “Very simple. I will vote for the person whose chicken is heavier!”\(^{38}\) The villager was clearly trying to show that villagers would always lean toward the candidate who offered them more. In fact, interviewees also said that candidates would usually not buy votes from people who were already in their camp, such as relatives and friends, or from people within the opposing candidate’s camp. Instead, only villagers belonging to the “middle camp” would receive offers. This makes sense since a candidate’s friends and relatives will

\(^{37}\) Interviews, village Y, Feb 2013  
\(^{38}\) Interviews, village J, Feb 2013
always vote for him even when they receive nothing, while the same group of people from the other side would never betray their close connection for just a few hundred Yuan because they would likely lose that relationship as a consequence.

However, this does not mean candidates can never buy votes from the other side. In some cases, candidates successfully bought votes from among their opponent’s supporters, but with a different prize: the promise of state benefits, such as a position in the village’s future leadership. Such promises are often regarded as valuable because they can bring voters prestige or a political career, so the approach works effectively for people who care greatly about their status or career. However, a drawback of this method is that the supply of resources is limited: a candidate cannot offer the position of vice chairman to two different people. Thus, such promises are often reserved for villagers who would have large impact on the election but cannot be easily bought with money.

A good example would be the election in W village, where candidate Hong tried to persuade Zhang, a strong supporter of the other candidate, to join his side. However, the chances of his being persuaded seemed slim since he had been friend with the incumbent village leader since childhood. But to many people’s surprise, he eventually joined Hong’s camp. Interviewees from this village believed the reason was that Hong offered him a promise that the other side could not match: to make him vice chairman of the village committee. This meant that he would not only receive stable pay and medical insurance from the government, but could also start a political career and enjoy higher prestige in the village. The other candidate could not make such an offer because during his ten years as the village’s leader, his vice chairman had always been his own brother – so it would be nearly impossible for him to offer the position to a person not even from
his own clan. In fact, it is believed that Hong had used a similar tactic on another friend of the incumbent and promised that if he could support Hong, Hong would appoint the villager’s wife as president of the Women’s Committee should he win the election.  

A similar story was told in village S, where a candidate promised a friend of the rival candidate that, if the friend were to switch sides, the candidate would urge the new village committee to let him qualify for medical insurance so that he could heal his injuries from a past car accident. Most of these strategies were indeed able to convince some individuals to switch over from the rival candidate. A key difference between these promise and cash is that the promises do not immediately benefit voters as cash does; rather, promises can be fulfilled only if the candidate actually wins the election. Clearly, the candidate cannot appoint a villager’s wife as chairman of the Women’s Committee or provide a villager medical insurance if he loses the election, so these key voters would actually incur a stronger incentive to help the candidate win by any means possible, such as persuading friends or relatives vote for the candidate as well. Therefore, through this strategy, candidates are able to combine their own best interest with that of certain voters and thereby recruit stronger supporters.

Nevertheless, the reality remains that no matter how well cash bribes or promises work for candidates, it would be unrealistic to expect them to be able to buy votes from all potential voters working alone. Not only do villages usually contain at least several hundred villagers (some even thousands), but the candidate may not be able to find and locate all potential vote sellers, especially these “middle camp” villagers. To make matter worse, for someone who does not know a villager well, it would seem strange and rude to

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39 Interviews, village W, March 2013
40 Interviews, village S, March 2013
just knock on their door and ask them to sell their vote. So how do candidates deal with these problems? The answer is that they hire local “brokers” to do the work for them.

Such brokers are known as “la zhuang 拉壮” in local areas, meaning to “let you become strong.” They usually hold regular jobs or own businesses, but are also known for having a strong familiarity with the village and the richest connections with certain groups of villagers. Thus, given their knowledge and connections, not only can they provide information as to which villagers can be bribed, but can also smoothly make the transaction on behalf of their candidate. For example, in village H, a candidate named Wei hired two to three brokers for each of the four production teams under the village who were known as the “most active” people in their teams. These brokers then discussed with him how many villagers from their teams might be bought off, and each received a certain amount of money from the candidate based on his estimate. However, in order to prevent these brokers from lying about who had agreed to sell their votes as a way to con money, Wei asked each broker to make a list of names and required that whenever a villager agreed to sell his vote, he would leave a red fingerprint next to his name. After the brokers had completed their jobs, they would take the name list back to Wei and would be rewarded based on the number of fingerprints. Rumor had it in that village that each fingerprint was worth 50 Yuan. This is usually also how brokers are most commonly used in other countries, especially in Taiwan.

But this is not the brokers’ only function. Some have rich connections not only within their own village but also outside the community with officials, entrepreneurs, or even the mafia. Given such relationships, they are able to help their candidate in a variety

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41 Interviews, village W, March 2013
of ways. For example, in village J, a broker was known for introducing his candidate to a local real estate developer with whom he had close relationship, and this developer agreed to sponsor the candidate. Another broker was known for arranging a meeting between his client and his uncle, a high-ranking county official, who agreed to “say something” to the township officials.\textsuperscript{43} Thus, even though previous literature has focused on how brokers act inside the community to help their clients, these stories suggest their activities and influence often reach far beyond the community boundary and help candidates win through a variety of different mechanisms.

\textit{Uncertain Compliance and Solutions}

One remaining problem for candidates is that, no matter how astutely they or their brokers deliver money to voters, there remains a chance voters may accept the money but not vote for the paying candidate. Of course, such a problem exists widely in other countries as well. For example, Wang and Kurzman found that in Taiwan at least 45\% of voters who sold their votes to Kuomingdang did not vote for its candidates.\textsuperscript{44} In order to deal with this issue, candidates from other countries have thus implemented a variety of fixes, such as making payments periodically rather than one time, monitoring the electoral procedures, and imposing informal sanctions through local brokers.\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{43} Interviews, village J, March 2013.
Similarly, candidates from the villages I studied had also arrived at their own solutions to ensure their money was not wasted. For example, a common method pursued in H and J village was that candidates would ask voters who had received the money to “mark” their own (villager’s) names on the ballot despite the fact that the election was to be processed by secret-ballot. A typical Chinese ballot simply lists the printed candidates’ names, and villagers are instructed to simply circle or check a name to indicate their choice. However, on some villages’ ballots, an extra blank line appears after the candidates’ names, on which villagers can fill in the name of any person they would like to vote for who does not appear on the list. Thus, the candidates ask villagers to write in their own (villager’s) name on this blank line after they’ve circled the candidate’s name, which would then become a “name mark” for voters. Since all ballots are counted immediately in front of all villagers, the candidates would then learn how each villager had voted.

Also, in some villages, candidates make their payments contingent on success rather than one-time or in advance. For example, in W village, instead of offering villagers cash, the candidate gave each of them a debit card with zero balance. His promise was that if he won the election, he would immediately transfer 500 Yuan onto each of the cards; conversely, if he lost, the villagers would receive no money. Thus, these strategies render vote buying a more feasible and attractive option since they help prevent villagers from taking money without following through on their promises. But even so, vote buying still only occurred in six villages rather than the entire fourteen. So why would vote buying only occur in some places but not others?

The Causes of Vote Buying

Economic Development and Vote Buying

Western scholars have arrived at different answers to this question. For example, Nitcher has argued that candidates pursue vote buying when they need to increase turnout;\(^48\) Lehoucq has asserted that candidates buy votes when they feel doing so can solve the principle-agent problem and cannot find other cost-efficient ways of influencing results.\(^49\) Additionally, scholars have found that vote buying can be affected by other political and social factors, including electoral systems, party rules, cultural norms, population size and legal systems.\(^50\) However, since there have only been limited studies on China’s vote buying, almost none of these factors have been carefully discussed or examined in China’s case. Instead, what scholars have heavily focused on is to study how election competitiveness could be affected by village’s level of economy.\(^51\) In fact, considering that candidates would usually pursue vote buying only when the election is very competitive, it might not be unreasonable to consider vote buying as an indicator of an election’s competitiveness. That is, if scholars find elections tend to be more competitive in richer or poorer villages, vote buying might also be more likely to occur in


\(^{49}\) Lehoucq, ‘When Does a Market for Votes Emerge’.


such villages, which is also in accordance with some western studies that correlate vote buying with voters’ income.\textsuperscript{52}

Nevertheless, when we examine economic levels of the 14 villages, we observe no such correlation. Among these 57 villages from the county, the highest average annual income of villagers was 9901 Yuan, and the lowest 6521 Yuan, with an average annual income of 7963 Yuan. From Table 1, we can see that villages that experienced vote buying in 2008 differed economically, ranging from very poor to very rich. For example, F village, in which candidates had offered cash to voters, was among the richest villages in the county, having an average annual income of more than 9800 Yuan. S and J villages, by contrast, were far under the county average with an annual income around 7000 Yuan, yet their candidates pursued vote buying as well. Further, if we compare these villages with villages in which no vote buying occurred, we see that they had quite similar economic conditions. For example, despite the fact that H’s candidates had pursued vote buying, while G’s candidates barely pursued any strategies, both villages had an average annual income around 9500 Yuan. Thus, the idea that a village’s level of economy predicts the emergence of vote buying is cast into doubt in this case.

\textit{Land Sales and Vote Buying}

If economic development is not the answer, then what is? My answer is that the key lies in the “economic returns” to be generated from the village’s \textit{land sales}. In other words, wherever land sales are more likely to occur after the election, candidates are

more likely to pursue vote buying because they can obtain higher economic returns from electoral victory. It should be noted that such idea is not completely new. In recent years, scholars (especially Chinese scholars) have begun to note the possible impact of land sales on elections. However, what no previous studies have yet undertaken is to prove the existence of such a relation and to fully explain how land sales encourage candidates to pursue vote buying.

In my interviews, the conversation with two “special” villagers greatly helped to develop the idea that vote buying could be associated with land sales. One of them was Tao, the father of candidate Hong from W village; while the other one was Cai, the sister of candidate Wei from H village. As shown in previous sections, both candidates had heavily pursued vote buying in their elections. And as their closest relatives, Tan and Cai’s answers provide us with a deeper insight to understand their incentives and considerations. Interestingly, when I asked them why their relatives had been so passionate about running for offices, both of their answers were related to land sales. Tao first listed several reasons, including the fact that the former leader had been corrupt and that his son had been quite popular. But what caught my attention was his saying that though they had originally felt the position of committee chairman might not be significant enough to pursue, they began to view it differently after the government granted the position more power in recent years, “especially since village leaders are now in charge helping the government to sell villagers’ land.”

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53 Kennedy, ‘The price of democracy’.
54 Interviews, village W, January 2013
Similarly, Cai also mentioned the impact of land sales on her brother’s decision, but she talked more about its “economic incentives”.\textsuperscript{55}

….What was more shocking to us was that he (the previous chairman) suddenly became very rich after the land sales. In the following year, he not only bought a new BMW X6, but also moved his family to one of the best local commercial residences. He used to earn only more than 5000 rmb than us, so now everyone understand that the meaning of being the leader has completely changed.

Thus, both interviewees correlated their relatives’ incentives with land sales, with one emphasized its “political benefits” while the other one focused on its “economic returns”. Even though they might not be telling the full story, their answers do suggest that a possible reason that Hong and Wei had pursued vote buying was to receive these benefits from land sales. So I took the question to ordinary villagers and asked them if they think it was the land sales that had made Hong and Wei so desperate about winning. As I expected, most of them not only agreed immediately and strongly, but they heavily pointed directly to the role of “economic returns.” One villager’s quote perhaps best represents the consensus:\textsuperscript{56}

If you spent money on past elections, you would be treated as a jerk because you could never get your money back. However, things started to change after the land sales. Now everyone knows that if you are in charge of the office, you can become very rich because of land sales. Just look how rich our former leader had become. Now everyone wants to become the leader.

\textsuperscript{55} Interviews, village J, January 2013
\textsuperscript{56} Interviews, W and J village, February 2013
Taking this as a start, I then took the question back to other villages where candidates had bought votes and asked their villagers similar questions. Like villagers from the first two villages, most cited land sales as the key factor that pushed candidates to pour so much money into elections. An interesting story was that some even seemed surprised that such a question even needed to be asked, as they thought it already turned into a “common sense” in local area.\textsuperscript{57} For example, an interviewee from J village said:\textsuperscript{58}

Look, if you realize how much money they have spent on elections, you must ask how can they get their money back. They are not stupid. So where does the money come from? What is the most valuable asset in a village? The land!

Another example would be these comments from an S villager:\textsuperscript{59}

It is now only the rich and powerful people who can win the elections because running is becoming so expensive. Some of them have even moved their homes and companies from counties back to the village. But why would successful people like them ever want to move back to the backward village? It can only be because they could get a higher income here. Clearly, the method is using land.

So after conducting plenty of interviews with villagers, my last step was to look into statistical numbers to seek evidence to support such a claim. Indeed, if we look back at Table 1, we see that most villages experiencing vote buying had witnessed large amounts of land sales since 2005. For example, while W had 1009 mou of farmland in 2005, it had only 444 mou left by 2008; H village had about 1700 mou of land in 2005, but three years later the figure had fallen to 1100 mou. The largest drop occurred in F village, which had almost 1800 mou in 2005 but less than 500 mou by 2008. The only

\textsuperscript{57} Interviews, H village, March 2013  
\textsuperscript{58} Interviews, Y village, February 2013  
\textsuperscript{59} Interviews, S village, February 2013
exception was S village, which did not experience any decline in their land areas. However, interviewees in this village mentioned that just before the election, a rumor had circulated that the county’s No.2 middle school was going to move next to their village, meaning that their land would become much more valuable. On the other side, although some villages that did not experience vote buying also had some farmlands sold, such as B and Q village, the amount sold was small compared to the previous villages. The largest sale happened in J village, which sold only slightly more than 200 mou. So compare to villages that experienced vote buying, most of these villages with no vote buying had remained quiet stable amount of land for the past decade.

Thus, if we combine this finding with previous interviews, we might find that candidates had indeed seemed to be more likely to pursue vote buying when they foresee land sales. However, we should not ignore some evidence that might against our conclusion. In the interviewees, there were also a few villagers that did not agree with this idea but claimed village leaders could profit through other means. For example, a villager noted that their previous leader used to arrange all the village’s reception meals in a restaurant he owned, where prices were much higher than other restaurants. Another villager explained that, after their chairman announced a new policy in 2004 to the effect that outside people could buy a residence permit [hu kou] and receive a piece of land from the village after paying 5000 rmb, he quickly accumulated huge wealth as the population grew 30% in the next 3 years. While it can be hardly denied that elected candidates could find other means to make economic profits, it should be noted that they would need to be “smart” to figure out their own strategies, as not everyone might think

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60 Interviews, F village, March 2013
61 Interviews, W village, March 2013
62 Interviews, S village, March 2013
to sell hu kou or establish a restaurant. In other words, in cases where it is not clear what resources could possibly be exploited for extra income, the candidates would have to bear the uncertainty and risk of receiving limited or no economic return for their campaign efforts. Land sales, however, present a different story because they can easily bring village leaders tremendous rewards. And as the next section will illustrate, the village leaders can always find plenty of strategies to arrange those rewards.

**Land Sales and Economic Returns**

So how do elected officials make money through land sales? It is important to note that, according to the Constitution, all rural land is “collective properties,” meaning that only the local government has the right to take or to sell the village’s land to companies. Thus, a standard procedure of land sales would entail the following steps: first, the local government would negotiate with a real estate company about selling a village’s land; second, after a deal is reached, the local government would notify village leaders about the terms of the deal, though village leaders have no right to object. Thereupon, they would tell villager leaders about the compensation standard that had been agreed to, and then ask them to turn over the land to the company. In other words, while village leaders have little impact on the actual negotiation procedures, their main responsibility is to make sure that villagers whose land has been sold all agree to give up their land. This is where the winner of the election can find plenty of opportunities to reap extremely high economic returns.

My fieldwork data indicated that village leaders often accomplish this objective in two major ways: first, they can directly embezzle the compensation fees that are supposed to belong to villagers, which is more likely to occur when the village’s

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63 Interviews, county government, March 2013
farmland is being sold. Second, they can try to reach secret deals with real estate companies on the exchange rates between the old apartments and new apartments. This would usually be observed in the sale of village’s residential land.

The main reason that elected officials are able to steal villagers’ compensation is that the village’s leadership are usually the only group of people who know the actual value of what is being traded by the village. This secrecy may be due to the fact that the government worries that releasing more details to villagers may cause dissatisfaction among villagers, which might harm the village’s stability. However, the flaw of such a procedure is that village leaders can get the villagers to accept a price lower than actual and pocket the difference themselves. For example, when F’s land was sold in 2007, villagers received only 18000 rmb for each mou of land they lost. However, villagers later learned from the village accountant that the actual compensation had been 22000 per mou, meaning that the village leader had embezzled 4000 rmb from each mou. Considering that the village sold at least 100 mou of land, the village leader had misappropriated an extra income of 400,000 Yuan. Similarly, in the Y village, villagers also accused their village leader of embezzling 6000 rmb from each each mou of land that were sold.

In addition, village leaders can also profit from the compensation for another source of land: the village’s public land such as roads, trees, or public square. When buying a village’s land, a real estate company often also needs to buy land that is included under the proposal. However, since the ownership and property rights of the public land have never been clearly identified, it is often the village’s leadership who can

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64 Interviews, F village, March 2013
65 Interviews, Y village, March 2013
claim the compensation paid for the land. A good example would still be the land sale in H village in 2007, where the developer also bought approximately 50 mou of the village’s public land, including its road and public square. However, all the compensation was appropriated by members of the village committee instead of given to villagers.  

While village cadres rely heavily on stealing the compensation from sales of the village’s farmland, they have more options when dealing with sales of the village’s residential land. This is because, unlike farmland, for which the compensation is only a certain amount of cash, the government encourages companies to offer villagers a new house. The size of the new house would be related to the size of the house that they turned in based on a certain exchange rate. For example, an exchange rate of 1:1.5 means that 100 square meters of villagers’ old house could trade for 150 square meters of the new houses that the company provide. However, since this exchange rate is usually negotiated between the real estate company and the village, the village leader finds himself with significant power in arranging not only the size of the houses that villagers can receive, but also the scale of profits that the company can make. Under such circumstances, a secret deal struck between the real estate company and the village leader is likely to become a win-win situation for both of them: the company can net extremely large extra profits if the village leader agrees to decrease the exchange rate beneath what it was supposed to be, and as a return they could reward the village leader with secret payments. The only people being hurt from such a deal are villagers who lost their land. A story told by a villager from H village offers evidence to support this idea:  

Everyone knows that the real estate company had reached a secret deal with our leader, as the housing exchange rate in was only 1:1.25. This rate was far too low,  

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66 Interviews, H village, March 2013
because even villages that have far worse locations get at least 1:1.3. Our secretary claimed it was because our houses were much older. Then we heard a rumor that the company had offered him 2 million yuan in return.  

Additionally, village leaders can also use their power to force villagers to accept unreasonable deals that benefit the company. For example, when H village’s land was sold in 2011, the village leader told villagers that if they wanted to exchange their houses, they would have to buy a parking lot that was about 10 square meters, based on the same exchange rate for their old housing. Considering that most villagers did not own a car at that time, this arrangement basically meant that they each lost 10 square meters of their old house for nothing. Also, in 2008, villagers from W village were told that the yard attached to their house could only rate an exchange of 1:1.15 instead of the regular rate of 1:1.35, which again cost them a significant loss. In fact, in this village, a rumor soon circulated that the village leader’s wife was witnessed in the act of listing 5 apartments at a real estate agency after the land sale.

The winning candidates could also pursue other strategies that would enable them to receive lucrative benefits from the company, such as recording a lower assessment of villagers’ land or forcing villagers who are unwilling to leave their houses to accept a cheap deal. Though some villagers have tried to petition the local government about this unfair treatment, they have received almost no response. This should not be surprising, because if the local government’s priority is only to make sure the land is sold so they will receive sufficient funding to support their operations, they have little concern about

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67 Interviews, H village, February 2013  
68 Interviews, H village, March 2013  
69 Interviews, W village, March 2013
specific terms, so long as they do not cause serious collective actions. This is certainly good news for village leaders as the lack of government scrutiny means they have more access and opportunity to steal huge economic returns from land sales without worrying being caught or punished. But of course, if they wish to access these returns, they have to first increase their chances of winning by pursuing strategies that are more persuasive to voters though also more expensive and dangerous – namely, vote buying.

**Conclusion**

In short, this paper argues that while candidates generally pursue three forms of vote buying – offering cash, making promises of state benefits, and hiring brokers – they are far more likely to do so when there are land sales in their villages because they can receive huge economic returns from the land sales once they win the election. This finding thus suggests that an important reason candidates are attracted to village leadership is so that they can reap potential economic profits when they take charge. But in order to obtain these benefits, they must first find ways beat out the competition. As a result, their selection of strategies for campaigning is largely based on their estimation of the economic returns from electoral victory: when they believe they could only earn limited returns, they pursue only inexpensive strategies or none at all; but when they foresee that electoral victory could grant them high returns, they are willing to risk expensive or even illegal strategies that can best help them defeat other candidates.

This finding can have also some important implications that could help us answer other significant questions related to village elections. For example, why do we not find villagers becoming less interested in running for office as scholars have expected, despite
the fact that the governments have been trying to constrain village cadres’ power? A possible explanation is that most of these constraints do not yet prevent village leaders from profiting from land sales. For example, even though the government implemented new regulations that village’s financial account has to be managed by the township government, the village cadres would never need to use these accounts to receive secret money from the real estate companies. Thus, even if the government plans to further weaken village cadres’ power, villagers would perhaps still display great interest in running for office as long as they can find ways to make money off their village position.

Also, while many scholars have noted that there has always been some degree of power struggle among village leaders, especially between the committee chairman and the party secretary, they have seldom questioned why each leader so intensely desires greater power. Findings from this study suggest that this struggle occurs might because only when they have become the “No.1” leader in the village, would they have the authority and power to steal compensation from villagers or to clinch secret deals with companies that could grant him illicit returns. And as a result, village leaders would have to seek to completely eliminate any other threats to their power.

However, at the same time, this study also leaves us with some important questions that have not yet been answered. For example, given that this fieldwork was conducted in only one county, how common are these patterns in other areas of China? Also, except for vote buying, what are some other expensive or radical strategies that candidates would pursue when they desperately wish to win the election? Further, if it is true that candidates are attracted to village leadership positions by their economic returns,


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70 See, e.g. Pastor and Tan, ‘The meaning of China’s village elections’; O’Brien and Han, ‘Path to democracy’.
of particular interest is the question of exactly what happens after they indeed win the election. Do they focus only on seeking profits for themselves? Or do they still have an incentive to provide for the public good? Thus, while this study may have helped us to look from a different perspective into factors that affect China’s village elections, these questions would deserve to be further explored.
### Table 1: Basic information of 14 villages

<table>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>G Village</td>
<td>402</td>
<td>1304</td>
<td>3633</td>
<td>9307</td>
<td>284</td>
<td>120</td>
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<td>X Village</td>
<td>435</td>
<td>1392</td>
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<td>6626</td>
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<td>410</td>
<td>574</td>
<td>7128</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>No (No other Strategies).</td>
</tr>
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<td>B Village</td>
<td>332</td>
<td>941</td>
<td>1092</td>
<td>7223</td>
<td>1948</td>
<td>2041</td>
<td>No (Greetings, small gifts).</td>
</tr>
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<td>Q Village</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>930</td>
<td>2610</td>
<td>9705</td>
<td>830</td>
<td>887</td>
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<td>1748</td>
<td>1946</td>
<td>6489</td>
<td>2993</td>
<td>2559</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>436</td>
<td>1500</td>
<td>1584</td>
<td>7050</td>
<td>583</td>
<td>790</td>
<td>No (Small gifts; cheap meals).</td>
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<td>L Village</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>507</td>
<td>931</td>
<td>7206</td>
<td>650</td>
<td>684</td>
<td>No (Small gifts).</td>
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<tr>
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<td>346</td>
<td>1009</td>
<td>3637</td>
<td>9511</td>
<td>444</td>
<td>1009</td>
<td>Yes: cash; brokers; promises.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F Village</td>
<td>630</td>
<td>1875</td>
<td>4632</td>
<td>9807</td>
<td>463</td>
<td>1791</td>
<td>Yes: cash; brokers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H Village</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>1886</td>
<td>5624</td>
<td>9496</td>
<td>1100</td>
<td>1781</td>
<td>Yes: cash; brokers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>169</td>
<td>472</td>
<td>656</td>
<td>7039</td>
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<td>932</td>
<td>793</td>
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<tr>
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<td>736</td>
<td>1597</td>
<td>8856</td>
<td>445</td>
<td>735</td>
<td>Yes: cash; promises.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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\(^{71}\) Each mou equal to about 6 acres

Source: County’s Yearbook