“New Wine, New Bottles”: The Emergence of a New-Style Village Collective

A robust collective economy was an important foundation for governance in Yantian, especially for the provision of public goods and services. Why has the collective driven the economy more effectively than in most other places where the collective existed in name only? With the inflow of foreign investment into the village, how did the relationship between the village collective and foreign-invested companies develop? What are the major sources of collective revenue and how are they distributed? This chapter provides a preliminary analysis of these questions.

The Village as a Collective Organization

Yantian’s social structure and the influx of foreign investment were the two main factors that caused the village to revive an economic structure dominated by the collective. Unlike in many other cases where the appellation of collective was used to legitimize de facto private activity, the collective in Yantian was a real entity with enormous impact on the villagers’ lives. First, as noted, the strength of the Deng lineage had long been a prominent feature of Yantian’s social structure. Their economic strength obviously exceeded that of other families; its members were more united and its numbers grew more rapidly than all the other families. According to preliminary statistics, on the eve of the founding of the PRC, the total population of Yantian was 4,274, and of these some 3,400 had the family name Deng (nearly 80% of the total population, Wang, Zhang, and Yao, 1996, 164). In June 2006, we were provided with a detailed household registration...
book, which showed that Yantian’s total population in April was 3,106, with 1,842 surnamed Deng (61.1% of the total population). The Deng family accounted for over 70 percent of the population in Shijie (79.7%), Donger (71%), Nanfang (72.7%), and Xifang (73.8%). Buxin and Shuibei were the two natural villages with the lowest percentages at 17 and 24.3 percent, respectively. While the proportion had thus dropped compared with pre-1949, the Dens still enjoyed an absolute majority.

More important than the numbers is the political dominance of the Dens. Four of the first group of five Yantian villagers to join the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) were members of the Deng family: Deng Chungui, Deng Wande, Deng Lianhuan, and Deng Ruihong. They joined in January 1951, the year that the Yantian party branch was set up. Since its foundation, six members of the Deng family have served as party branch secretary: Deng Chungui, Deng Xulin, Deng Jiuquan, Deng Wande, Deng Yaohui, and Deng Zerong. Of these, Deng Yaohui served for 30 years from 1981. Since the establishment of the party branch, there has only ever been one deputy secretary, Chen Guangsheng, who was not a member of the Deng family. As far as village administration is concerned the village head was also a member of the Deng lineage. From 1951 to the present, eight members of the Deng family had served in this position: Deng Wanjiu, Deng Chungui, Deng Xulin, Deng Wande, Deng Jiuquan, Deng Yaohui, Deng Zerong, and Deng Manchang. Similarly, only one non-Deng family member, Chen Guangsheng, has served as the village head, and then only for one term (1985–1988). The Deng lineage’s pre-1949 political dominance was thus carried over into the CCP era. This dominance of village decision making by the Dens facilitated the primacy of the collective in the village.

In 1995, we were provided with a list of telephone numbers of Yantian officials and other staff. Of the 43 leading officials in the village, only six were not Dens, meaning the Deng lineage accounted for 86 percent of the leadership (Wang, Zhang, and Yao, 1996, 164). In February 2009, we compared the latest list, and of the 65 listed village leaders, 43 belonged to the Deng family (66.2%), reflecting a decline but still revealing the lineage dominance. Most importantly, Dens occupied key posts in the three most important agencies in the village: the CCP general branch, the villagers’ committee, and the shareholding economic cooperative. In 2011, six of the seven members of the general party branch, four of the five members of the villagers’ committee, and six of the seven members of the Shareholding Economic Cooperative were Dens. Such statistics clearly indicate