In the previous chapters we have examined economic organization and social development, and these enormous changes have led in turn to a significant restructuring of village governance. This chapter reviews the changes in village administration and the decision-making structures for policy implementation. One constant feature is the preeminence of the village party branch, but it is embedded in a network of institutions that manage village administration and economic life. It is important to note that the governing structure prior to 1999 was opaque to say the least. While, to all intents and purposes, Yantian was considered a village, it was actually classified as a “township,” from 1986 it was referred to as the Yantian Management Area (guanliqu). This meant that “village” leadership was appointed from above. Thus, village self-governance came late to Yantian and it was only in 1999, after passage of the revised “Organic Law of Villagers’ Committees” (“Organic Law”) that it was formally classified as a village and adopted an administrative structure more familiar to the rest of rural China. Yantian has adopted the system of villagers’ self-governance, village elections, regulations concerning transparency of village affairs, and villagers’ supervision. Of special importance in Yantian is the one further organization, the shareholding cooperative that manages the villagers’ economic affairs.

Village Self-Governance

In chapter 1, we outlined the basic structure of village organization and the experimentation in village governance that culminated in the adoption of the 1999 “Organic Law.” On June 13, 1999, in accordance with the “Guangdong Province Electoral Method for the Villagers’ Committee” (Guangdongsheng cunmin weiyuanhui xuanju banfa), Yantian held its first election. Not surprisingly, Deng Yaohui, party secretary of the Yantian Management Area, was
elected head of the first villagers’ committee. Deng Manchang was elected deputy head together with five other members. In line with the regulation that elections be held every three years, voters turned out in January 2002, 2005, 2008, and most recently in April 2011. In addition to the elections, other important measures to regulate village affairs are those encouraging transparency, cooperation between the village governing organizations, and supervision over village officials.

Twelve years later on October 28, 2010, the seventeenth meeting of the Standing Committee of the Eleventh National People’s Congress adopted a number of amendments to deal with challenges that had arisen from the changed situation in the countryside. In particular, the revisions sought to make the recall of elected deputies easier, to make meetings easier, and to improve oversight mechanisms in the village. As we have seen in previous chapters, a major challenge for village governance is that migration has frayed and often severed the links between actual residence and official household registration. Tens of millions of rural inhabitants no longer live in the place of their household registration (hukou). In Yantian, the 70,000 to 80,000 plus migrants do not enjoy any political rights in the village. The revisions to the “Organic Law” tried to shift the basis for rights from household registration to actual place of residence by extending voting rights in elections to those who had lived in the village for more than a year. However, this was accompanied by the proviso that approval must come from the villagers’ assembly or the villagers’ representative assembly. Not surprisingly, villagers, especially those in a wealthy place such as Yantian, are highly unlikely to open up the political process in such a way that would undermine their power. In the village election in April 2011, no migrant workers, or at best very few, participated.

The Constitution and the “Organic Law” provide the legal foundation for village self-governance and also highlight the need for democratic elections: the “three self-governance” and the “four democracies.” Self-governance means that villagers can organize themselves to deal with their own public affairs and to discharge their rights and interests through self-management, self-education, and self-service. Self-management is interpreted to mean that villagers organize themselves in line with the law to manage jointly the village public affairs; self-education means that villagers can upgrade their knowledge and improve their management skills by organizing themselves to address public affairs; and self-service means organizing themselves to deliver all necessary services.