What accounts for the variance of democratization in Rural China
-- A study on village elections in rural Guangdong

By Ting Luo

China’s development in advocating elections at grassroots level, namely, rural villages, has attracted international attentions. The draft Law of villagers’ committees was promulgated in 1989 which indicated the beginning of ten-year trial of village elections in rural areas, while the passage of 1998 official Law represents the institutionalization of village democracy in rural China. According to the official Law, rural villages in China which used to be governed by appointed brigades is now managed by popular elected villagers’ committees. Villagers’ committees are no longer state organs, but “organs of self governance by which villagers educate, manage and serve themselves” (Article 2). Members of villagers’ committees are required by the Law to be elected by all eligible voters within villages. The official Law sets up the basic principle of the elections such as secret ballots, one man one vote, the independence of village election committees, etc. The specific election process is left for provincial and county level governments to design based on local contexts.

There are variance across provinces on starting village elections. The earliest one, such as Jilin, started to implement village elections in rural areas in 1988, while the latest one, such as Guangdong, started the democratization process in 1998. Besides, different provinces set up different standards and practice of the specific election process. For example, Fujian provincial regulation stipulates that proxy voting is strictly prohibited, while in many other provinces, proxy voting is widely used. Hence, it is difficult to offset the effects of variance across provinces on village elections by taking a comparative study across provinces. This study will take the latest reformer, namely, Guangdong province, on village democratization as a sample.

The research question is why there is variance across villages in implementing village elections, which is the core issue of grassroots democratization in China, even within the same county. A county in Guangdong is selected and several villages at this county are chosen to do detail case study. This county is relatively poor and located in northeast Guangdong. However, within this county, there are great variance across selected villages on economic resources, population, etc, which are useful for this research. I have worked as a consultant of 2008 village elections in the county level Civil Affair Bureau for three months from March to June, 2008. And in July 2009, I spent one month in the county to visit some villages and interview village cadres, villagers, township officials, and county officials. All the data are collected by these two periods. Putting aside generalization, this paper hopes to offer new insights into village elections reform in rural China.

This paper is organized as follows. The first section of this paper reviews existing studies on the influence of economic factors on Chinese democratization. Then, the dependent variable, namely, quality of village elections, is defined. The actual implementation of village elections is delineated. Then the paper explains what factors account for the variance of the actual implementation of village elections. In the final section, this paper recap and conclude all the points. Area for further research is also laid down.

1. Literature review

On explaining what factors influence democratization, economic factors are considered as important ones. At some early studies, GDP is considered to have some influence on the implementation of village elections. Shi (1999, p425), based on his empirical data gathered from 1993 national survey, finds out that “the relationship between economic development and village
elections appears to be a concave curve”. Economic development increases the likelihood of a village to hold semicompetitive elections, but its impact declines as economy develops further. Rapid economic development may delay the process of democratization by offering incumbents economic resources which can be transferred into powers to stunt democratic reform. However, in Shi’s study, economic development is measured by Per capita GDP and speed of economic development of the county in which a village is located. This measurement is very rough and inappropriate, since within a county the variance of Per capita GDP of individual villages can be great. The county level GDP and speed of economic development can not well reflect village economic situation. A more up-to-date research conducted by Hu (2005) shows that rather than GDP, it is collective revenue that increases the competitiveness of elections and arouses villagers’ interests in participation, based on data from selected villages in Fujian Province in 2001. O’Brien (1994) also points out that in wealthy villages and villages with large collective economies, the implementation of village political reform are more likely to be up-to-standard. The implementation of village political reform is measured by two dimensions, namely, the effectiveness of the execution of unpopular state tasks and level of political participation. Another study done by Oi and Rozelle (2000) points out that the less the economic ties of villagers to the outside world, the higher the interests of villagers in village politics and the greater the likelihood that power locates in the hands of elected villagers’ committees and village participatory bodies. In general, collective revenue, rather than GDP, is more convincing in explaining the implementation of village political reform. Since collective economies rather than Per capita GDP matter for every villager within the village and it is the responsibility of villagers’ committees to develop collective economies, the elections are likely to arouse high level participation and competition.

But, these arguments do not pay attention to the institutional arrangement of villages in allocating the economic resources. Villagers’ committees, as agents of administrative villages, may have some economic resources, but do not have the power to distribute the resources, since these resources belong to individual natural villages. Secondly, whether collective revenue is generated from one-off payment from selling lands or from long term management of collective resources also matter for the implementation of village elections, which has not yet been addressed by existing literature. This research, based on detail case study, will address these two factors and explain how these factors influence the implementation of village elections.

Before analyzing the determinants of the implementation of village elections, the following section will explain how to measure the quality of village elections. And a detail analysis of the implementation of village elections in reality will also be presented.

2. Village elections in reality

Measuring the quality of village elections

In this research, the quality of village elections will be evaluated based on the election process. The specific election process is designed by county level governments based on the official Law and provincial regulations. The basic democratic value is guaranteed in the design of specific election process since it is required by the official Law and provincial regulations. To follow democratic election process is the baseline of achieving real democracy. Hence, this research adopts a procedural definition of village elections.

According to the plan of implementing village elections in 2008 at the sample county selected by this research, there are several procedures to follow. First, an independent election committee must be elected by villagers’ council or village group meetings in order to organize the following elections. Second, there are 10 days for each village to conduct voter registration. All villagers who have reached the age of 18 have the right to vote and stand for the elections, except persons deprived of political rights according to law. Third, village election committee must organize the elections for a leader and a vice-leader of each village group. The leaders must be elected by household representative assemblies. Four, the elections for villagers’ representative should be
conducted and the elections are valid through villagers' council or household representative assemblies. Five, elections for the candidates of villagers' committees must be conducted through villagers' council or village group meetings. The number of candidates must exceed the number of positions available. Finally, a village-wide voting meeting must be conducted to elected the official members of villagers' committees and the turnout rate (including voting in fixed boxes and mobile boxes) must be more than 50% of eligible voters. The final two processes, elections for candidates and official members of villagers' committees, can be condensed into one process if two conditions are fulfilled. One, the elections for the candidates are conducted through villagers' council. Two, the turnout rate reach at least 50% of the eligible voters and at least one of the candidates receives 50% votes of the turnout. Then the candidates who receives 50% votes of the turnout can become the official members of villagers' committees, while the remaining vacant positions will be filled by a follow-up election in which candidates who get one third votes of the turnout can be elected.

There are several issues to be taken special care in the above mentioned election process. If the election is conducted through household representative meetings, the election is valid when two thirds of household representatives attend the meetings. If the election is conducted through villagers' council, it is valid when 50% of the eligible voters attend the council. A candidate is successful in getting the position as a village group leader, a member of village election committee, a candidate for members of the villagers' committee or an official member of the villagers' committee only when he or she receives 50% votes of the voters who cast vote either in fixed boxes or mobile boxes or by proxy voting.

As can be seen from the election process at the sample county, village elections consist of five elections, namely, elections for the election committee, elections for village group leaders, elections for village representatives, elections for the candidates of villagers' committees and elections for villagers' committees. All the elections require the participation of at least 50% of eligible voters in order for the voting results to be valid.

In this research, whether a village conducts all these five elections or four in case the final two elections are condensed in to one according to the official requirement represents the quality of village elections. The better a village adheres to official requirement, the better the quality of the village election of this village.

Village elections in reality

In reality, there is variance across villages even within the same county in implementing village elections. No all the villages will strictly follow the official guideline of conducting elections. As mentioned by a township official who is responsible for the supervision and guidance of village elections, there is a dilemma in the actual implementation of official guideline of village elections. By advocating villagers' council or villagers' representative assembly in the election process, the central government intends to promote public participation and guarantee the democratic value of the elections. In an ideal situation, villagers' councils should be convened to carry on all the five elections involved and if there is any problem or issue related to all the villagers in time of elections, either a villagers' representative assembly or a villagers' council should be convened. However, in reality, it is not realistic to strictly follow the requirement of holding meetings for all the five elections involved. Villagers need to make money for living. To convene 5 meetings during one month when the village election is carried on is too bothersome for ordinary villagers who have jobs. Thus, it is difficult to guarantee the turnout.

To compensate villagers for their costs in attending the meetings is an effective way to guarantee the turnout. Then a second problem comes forth. The cost of convening the meetings is likely to be too expensive. Suppose in a small village with 1000 eligible voters, each voter is paid 10 yuan for attendance of a meeting, which is the minimum price in the sample county in order to

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2 Interview with a township official, northeast Guangdong, August 5, 2009.
guarantee turnout. To convene five meetings in one round of village election, the total amount is 50,000 yuan. The total amount calculated above does not include all the other costs associated, such as allowance for members of election committees and other election staff. At the sample county, county government spends around 0.5 yuan per voter on the elections, which accounts for only 1% of the total amount (50,000). Large amount of the costs must be covered by villages' own financial resources. Moreover, in the sample county, there is only a few small villages. Most villages have at least 2000 to 3000 eligible voters. Much higher cost is associated. To strictly follow official guideline of conducting village elections poses financial burdens on many villages, especially relatively poor villages and villages with less economic resources. Hence, "in reality, simplified version of village elections are adopted by many villages".

An independent village election committee is the baseline to guarantee the fairness of the elections. But, in reality, the election committee is not necessarily set up by popular votes. In some villages, a household representative assembly is convened to elected for members of the election committee. In some other villages, village party branch or the incumbent villagers' committees decide the members, and sometimes members are selected from villagers' representatives or group leaders. For group leaders and villagers' representatives, in quite a few villages, voting is not convened at all. If no one argue against the group leaders and villagers' representatives, all the members will be in the position for next 4 years. In some villages, old persons with prestige among villagers will be villagers' representatives for sure without any election to validate their positions. The elections for the candidates and official members of villagers' committees are the core of village elections. And all villages are required to hold the elections. The candidates are elected by popular votes in some villages, while in some other villages, candidates are elected either by household representatives or villagers' representatives. In some villages, candidates are pre-decided by township governments. The official members of villagers' committees in many villages are elected by popular votes. But in some villages they are pre-decided and the election is just a showcase. Still in some villages, buying votes is very common. The one who pays the highest price per vote wins the election. In the sample county, many villages condensed the final two processes into one process, which is called "two in one" in the Guangdong provincial regulations for village elections and is promoted by the Guangdong provincial government. As can be seen, there is great variance across villages on the actual implementation of village elections. What accounts for this variance is the central question of this research. The following section explains what social contexts make villages select different implementation strategies by case study.

3. Explaining the variance

In the implementation of village elections, as mentioned above, having money to support the organization of the whole election process is a necessary condition. The meaningful participation of villagers is another condition to guarantee the function of democracy. However, in the actual implementation of village elections, at a county with same official requirement for the organization of village elections, villages choose different implementation strategies. Some may strictly follow the official procedures, while some simplify the procedures. Based on my fieldwork at the county, I argue that there are several factors which influence the strategic choice of individual village. These factors include collective economies, composition of collective economies, percentage of villagers working outside of villages. In the section, all the factors will be explained with detail cases to support my arguments and illustrate the causal processes.

Collective resources

The villagers' committee is responsible for the self governance of an administrative village which normally consists of several natural villages, especially in southern China. After the decollectivisation, generally, all the natural resources especially arable lands within villages are allocated to individual villagers. But in some villages, some woodlands and pounds which are difficult to divide are still in the hands of either administrative villages or natural villages. Which

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3 Ibid.

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level of villages owns collective resources and has the power to distribute the resources influence the competitiveness and the actual implementation of the elections.

Wan village, 12 kilometers away from county center, is a good case to explain the effect of collective resources. Wan village has around 2,000 villagers and 6 natural villages. There is no collective economy for the villagers’ committee to manage and distribute. However, a natural village called He village within Wan with 500 people got its own collective resources to manage. As can be seen from table 1, He natural village has some woodlands and pound to distribute which can earn around 20,000 yuan per year. According to my interview, He natural village will hold an election for a three-member management committee every two or three years when villagers demand for. The three members are elected by popular votes. And they are responsible for the management of collective resources. At least 50% of the villagers attend the voting meetings and cast votes for their preferred candidates. The leader and vice leader of the committee will automatically become the group leader and vice group leader of the He natural village. In 2008 election, a new leader, defeating the incumbent leader, won the election for the head of management committee in He natural village.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Wan administrative village</th>
<th>He natural village</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>2,000 people</td>
<td>500 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective resources</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Some woodlands and one pound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management of collective resources</td>
<td>No applicable</td>
<td>Letting the woodlands and pound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual collective revenue</td>
<td>No profit generated from collective resources, 30,000 yuan per year governmental subsidies from county government to cover administrative costs</td>
<td>Around 20,000 yuan per year from letting the collective resources, and the contract period is 30 years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village elections</td>
<td>Simplified election process, almost showcase, no competition</td>
<td>Hold its own elections for a three-member management committee which consists of a leader, a vice-leader and a treasurer in every two years or three years when villagers call for.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, the election in Wan administrative village is very simplified. I came across some villagers with one of them being primary school teacher who did not know the date of election for members of the villagers’ committee and did not cast votes for the members of villagers’ committee in 2008 village election. There is no election for the election committee, and all the members are selected by the incumbent villagers’ committee among villagers’ representatives and group leaders. In order to fulfil the requirement of multiple candidates for similar position, a few weak showcase candidates are selected to compete with strong candidates who are definitely going to win the elections. Besides one fixed voting box at the primary school within the village, there are 6 mobile voting boxes traveling in the six natural villages respectively. In some natural villages, a few village group leaders or representatives fill in all the ballots on behalf of villagers.

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4 Interview with two members of villagers' committees, and a few villagers on August 7, 2009.

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inside the natural villages. Villagers actually acquiesce this practice since "no matter who wins the election, there will be no change to my life. I still need to till the land for living." 

It is likely that the population rather than the existence of collective resources influence the implementation of village elections in Wan village and He village. Thus, I will present another sub-village election happened in another natural village, namely, Zhu natural village, which belongs to a different administrative village at the same township. Zhu natural village is the largest natural village of Mao administrative village, which is next to Wan village. Zhu natural village has around 1000 villagers. It also has some woodlands and ponds to let. The annual collective revenue of the Zhu natural village is around 30,000 yuan. In this natural village, it holds similar election for a three-member management committee as He natural village does. As can be seen, it is the existence of collective resources that influence the strategic choice of villages.

Collective resources influence the welfare of the villagers, thus, villagers have the interests to participate in the elections and select their preferred candidates in order to guarantee their vested economic interests. More over, the organization of election needs financial support. Villages with collective resources can afford the costs of organizing village elections. Besides, to be a member of the villagers’ committee in a wealthy village with collective economies can get not only financial benefits but also political benefits. On the one hand, members of villagers’ committees normally get 350 yuan per person per month from the county government as subsidies. In wealthy villages, they can get extra pays which are financed by collective economies. In some wealthy villages at the sample county where the income per capita is around 3000 yuan annually, members of villagers' committees can get around 500 yuan extra pays per person per month. On the other hands, normally economically wealthy villages have relatively close relations with governments. To be a member of the villagers’ committee can help to create political network for personal use, such as getting better jobs for relatives or getting discounts on taxes for the members' own business. The more the benefits associated with the positions, the more competitive the elections for villagers' committee. In a competitive election, village are more likely to strictly follow the official requirements, otherwise a minor flaw in the procedure can be used by the competitor to appeal to the government and government officials may invalidate the elections. It is for these reasons that village elections in wealthy villages are more likely to strictly follow official requirements compared with those villages with little or no collective economies.

Composition of collective revenue

Besides the existence of collective economies, the composition of collective revenue is also influential. Based on my trip at the sample county, I argue that if the collective revenue is generated from one-off payment by selling land, rather than long term management of collective assets, the village election will be very competitive but irregular. Candidates in such a village are likely to buy votes in order to get the position. Thus, who pays the highest price per vote wins, which violates the principle of political equality. Here, two villages will be presented to illustrate the causal processes involved.

Deng village is a large village with around 5,000 villagers and 6 natural villages. It is located right at the county center. Most of its lands have been bought for governmental use and commercial use. In terms of governmental use, the buildings of county government, various county level bureaus and township government are built up on the land which belonged to the Deng village. Entrepreneurs also bought the land from Deng village for business. Hence, from 1999 to 2008, the Deng village generates almost all its collective revenue from selling lands to governments or entrepreneurs. Nowadays the Deng village still has land resources to sell. The elected villagers' committee is responsible for the management of collective lands and revenues. More over, since it
is located at the county center with resourceful lands which can be used by governments, it has a close relation with governments. "Deng village is like the capital city Beijing in our county, which is strategically important for the economic development of our county". Hence, the villagers' committee of Deng village, to some extent, has not only economic power but also political power. In every round of village elections, the elections for villagers' committees are extremely competitive. The competitiveness of the elections force the village to strictly follow official requirements. However, buying votes is very common in every round of elections. In the recent 2008 village elections, the elected chair of the villagers' committee spent around 500,000 yuan. Voters who vote for him will receive an average of 100 yuan and two to three small boxes of cigarette, equal to around 100 yuan, per vote. The competitor who spent less than him lost the competition. In the 2005 village elections, there was social chaos since the two rival groups fight against each other and some villagers were seriously injured. Compared to the showcase elections in Wan village mentioned above, the village election in the Deng village goes to the other extreme, namely, coexistence of competitive elections and social chaos.

Since in the case of Deng village, the importance role of the village to the county government may possibly be a variable which influences the implementation of village elections, rather than the composition of collective revenue. Another case will be used to further support my argument. Yang village, a small village with around 1500 villagers, is located 8 kilometers away from county center. In the township where Yang village is located, Yang village is considered as a relatively remote and poor village. However, in around 2002 to 2003, there was one entrepreneur who wanted to buy some of the lands in the hands of Yang village to build a technical training school, although the plan was finally aborted in 2003. In the 2002 village elections, compared to the 1999 village elections, the competition was extremely intense and buying votes was also practiced by candidates. Actually, money won the elections.

Land is scarce resource. Compared with renting land, selling land can get a large amount of funds at a time. Especially when governments want to buy the land, "you have to sell the lands to governments at the price the governments offer". For villages which have no collective economies, getting a one-off payment from selling lands is like winning a lottery. Every one want to have a bite on the funds. Getting one-off payment from selling lands to governments or entrepreneurs is much easier for members of villagers' committees to get a bite, compared with long term management of collective assets, such as letting assets. Long term management of collective assets normally is protected by long term contracts which is difficult for village cadres to get a fortune, although a little benefit is possible. At Deng village, per mu arable land is sold at the price of 30,000 yuan to governments, which belongs to the villagers who own the arable lands. But among this transaction, villagers' committees get around 200 yuan per mu arable land as development fund paid by the governments. Moreover, in measuring the arable lands, normally, the ridge between fields belongs to the collective. Thus, villagers' committees can also get extra money from selling these ridges. Besides, there may possibly be some transaction under the table which is not known to the public. The chair of villagers' committee is likely to be bribed by entrepreneurs so that the entrepreneurs can get a better deal. The political power associated with the transaction of selling collective assets and the possibility of earning a big fortune from the one-off payments make it rational for candidates to invest money in the elections. The competition for the position in villagers' committees is actually the competition for power and the money associated behind the power.

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7 Interview with a township official on August 6, 2009.
8 Since Guangdong started the village elections in 1999, there are four round of elections from 1999 to 2008 with one round every three years.
9 Interview with a relative of the elected chair of the villagers' committee, August 5, 2009.
10 Interview with one retired village cadres in the Deng village, July 28, 2009.


**Percentage of villagers working outside of villages**

The percentage of villagers who work outside of villages and the distance between their working place and home villages influence the quality of village elections. Two similar villages (Table 2) will be used here to illustrate the casual mechanism.

Table 2 Comparison of Xin village and Chang village

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Xin village</th>
<th>Chang village</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>3,000 people</td>
<td>3,000 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of natural villages</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual collective revenue</td>
<td>Around 6,000 yuan (too less to cover administrative costs). It needs financial support from county government to maintain the daily function of the villagers' committee.</td>
<td>None. It needs financial support from county government to maintain the daily function of the villagers' committee.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Villagers working outside of villages</td>
<td>Around 10% young villagers immigrate to the Pearl River Detal (at least 500 kilometers away from the county). Most young villagers work at the factories nearby.</td>
<td>Around 80% young villagers immigrate to the Pearl River Detal for job opportunity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of the village elections</td>
<td>Better in following the official guidelines.</td>
<td>The election is purely a showcase.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Xin village has around 3000 villagers and 6 natural villages. It only has a collective own pound to let in recent years and the collective revenue generated from letting the pound is too less to cover the administrative costs. The basic daily function of the villagers' committee has to rely on governmental subsidies. Chang village shares similar characteristics. However, these two villages are different on the percentage of young villagers working in the Pearl River Detal far away from the county. Xin village has around 10% young villagers working in the Pearl River Detal while Change village has around 80% young villages immigrating to remote wealthy areas. In time of village elections, different arrangement of village elections can be seen in the two villages.

Take the 2008 village election for example. Xin village followed the official requirements of election process. There were four election processes because the final two processes were condensed into one. All the election process involve the participation of either 50% of villagers or two thirds of household representatives. Moreover, proxy voting, which causes confusion and manipulation of voting in practice, was strictly prohibited based on the decision of the election committee. Actually, in the township where Xin village is located, proxy voting is permitted in all the other 31 villages.

The election in Chang village is purely a showcase. There is no election for the village election committee. The incumbent village party branch and villagers' committee decide the members of election committee. There is no work for the election committee to carry on, since there is no election for group leaders and villagers' representatives. Villagers' representatives are those old people with prestige among villagers. The members of villagers' committee are pre-decided by the township government. On the date of the election for villagers' committee, some villagers with prestige are selected from 5 natural villages. They will fill in all the ballots on behalf of their own natural villages and the ballots will be put into the mobile boxes they carried. The result of the election will have no surprise. The five members of the elected villagers' committee are from the
five natural villages, hence, they automatically become the group leaders of their own natural villages.

For Xin village, since most young workers work in the nearby factories and most of them still live in the village, it is much easier and less costly for them to participate in the village elections, compared to those working far away. The participation can be either voting or running for the office. In the 2008 village elections, two members of incumbent villagers' committee did not get reelected. And there are some young villagers running for the elections although they were no successful. For Chang village, 80% young villagers are working far away from the village. In terms of time and costs, it is not realistic for them to ask a few days off and travel far away back home to cast their votes. Since they are living outside of the village, they care nothing about the self-governance of the village, thus, they have no interest to either cast votes or run for the election. In such a condition, conducting elections is just a political show.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, these three factors measure the tie of villagers to the village. The more the tie of villagers to the village, the more competitive the elections. Competitiveness is the intervening variables, relating the above mentioned three factors and the implementation of village elections. Villagers in wealthy villages with collective economies have more stakes in the collective, thus, they are more interested in participation, either voting or running for elections, compared to villagers in the poor villages. Further more, if this kind of villages generates collective revenue from selling lands, the election will be extremely competitive, since candidates want to get a bite on the one-off payments, which are normally large amount. But, this factor has a negative effect on the organization of village elections, because it will incur political inequality in the sense that the one who spends the most wins the elections. And the political power associated behind the transaction is also what the competitors are running after. Actually, getting a large amount of payments from selling lands is like winning a lottery, which impairs the fairness of the elections and may possibly dampen the progress of democratization. Percentage of workers working outside of villages and how far they are from villages influence the cost of participation.

To offset the negative influence of generating one-off payments from selling lands, villages may need some institutional arrangements to supervise the transaction and the use of the one-off payments, which is beyond the scope of this paper and need further research.

Reference


