

College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Rural Democracy in China: The Role of Village Elections by Baogang He

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become an important type of protest group in China today and, while activists use the divisions in the state apparatus for their own purposes, organizations within the Party-state have also begun to make use of social movements. An example is provided by the State Environment Protection Agency (SEPA), which has used environmental NGOs to promote its own agenda and status against its bureaucratic adversaries—much as Mao or Deng used outside forces to put pressure on other Party-state actors. Sun and Zhao therefore raise an interesting point: the state–society relationship may be evolving from one of the state *vs.* the whole civil society (as in 1989) to a phase where state agencies are able to set NGOs against each other in their own internal disputes.

Everyone interested in contemporary Chinese protests and social movements will find the book worth reading. It also calls for further research using concepts from studies in contentious politics. The book thus raises the level of theoretical debate by asking how well these concepts travel to China and what China can give back to them. This is a highly welcome goal.

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Rural Democracy in China: The Role of Village Elections, by Baogang He. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. xii + 277 pp. AU\$136.00/US\$74.95/£42.50 (hardcover).

This book is the most comprehensive study ever written in English on village elections in China. While the existing studies tend to focus on a single aspect of the grassroots elections, Baogang He's wealth of knowledge of rural China drawn from more than a decade of field studies from 1993 to 2005 provides him with a nuanced understanding of the various interrelated issues affecting rural democracy. He provides an extensive discussion of various dimensions of rural democracy (village citizenship, competitiveness of village elections, political participation and the village representative assembly) before addressing the ways in which elections affect village power structures and the relationship between village and township leaders. Furthermore, he examines how kinship ties and the level of economic development of locales affect election outcomes, and assesses the prospects for democratization in China.

The issue of village citizenship—which determines voter eligibility—is a touchy one, particularly in prosperous villages. The rapid pace of economic development, urbanization and migration flows have made the determination of village citizenship a tricky task for grass-roots leaders. The thorniest issue is ascertaining residence status. In rich locales where there are collective goods to be shared among villagers, women who have married out tend to demand the right to vote, as do migrant workers who have lived there for a certain period of time. Migrant workers who work for many years in urban centers often find that they

lose the right to vote in their home villages once their household registrations have been transferred.

Elections of village heads have altered the power balance between the village Party secretary, the village head and the village representative assembly. Although in most cases the village Party secretary still has authority over the village enterprises and economy, and appoints the people who sit in the representative assembly, in selected locales the Party secretary is forced to share his prerogatives with the elected village head, and the village representative assembly becomes a locus of power in competition with the Party branch committee. He observes that some representative assemblies were replacing the Party branch committees as the final decision-making institutions in the villages, and they increasingly checked the power of the Party. There is no predetermined factor in the power-sharing arrangement; much hinges on the individual village leaders in question.

His research reveals a higher participation index in elections in the collective-dominated villages than in private or agricultural ones. The rationalization is that the collective-dominated villages tend to be richer and can afford to provide basic public goods and distribute benefits to the villagers; hence, the residents have a greater material stake in the elections, compared to those in poor agricultural locales. However, He should be cautious in concluding that his findings support the modernization theory of increased democratization as a result of higher income levels; the correlation between the participation index and types of economy does not necessarily imply causation.

How do kinship structures affect village elections? Deng Xiaoping's economic reform, particularly the Household Responsibility System, has rekindled the kinship consciousness almost destroyed by Mao's collectivization movement. He finds that villagers tend to vote for lineage candidates in a village where a commercial economy has not been fully developed. In an economically developed village, villagers vote according to their economic interests, leaving kinship ties as a secondary consideration. That said, the impact of kinship on the outcomes of village elections is still very limited, because the Communist Party apparatus penetrates deeply all facets of rural society.

Why do the local Communist Party leaders support village elections? What incentives do they have in ceding the power of appointment to the villagers? He argues that the party leaders are being Machiavellian in that "village elections can be the most effective way to solve tough problems in the village". The leaders may not be interested in democratization *per se*, but they view popular elections as a pragmatic means to help them govern and to achieve stability in their jurisdictions. This leads He to conclude that China is a "mixed regime", combining "a complex social control mechanism (and) a strategy of balancing democracy and authority".

Given the breadth of issues covered in this book, one wonders whether He would have come to different conclusions if the field studies have been extended beyond Zhejiang and Hubei, the two provinces from which his findings are

drawn. It is not inconceivable that some determinant factors, such as level of economic development and kinship ties, will exhibit different patterns in other parts of this vast country. This is a minor quibble. This first-ever comprehensive survey of village elections deserves to be widely read by scholars interested in democratization in China and graduate students looking for inspiration about interesting issues relating to rural democracy that remain under-investigated.

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China's Changing Political Landscape: Prospects for Democracy, edited by Cheng Li. Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2008. xvi + 342 pp. US\$29.95/£17.99 (paperback).

In this edited book, fifteen top China scholars offer compelling, empirically rich and illuminating snapshots of trends in the development of China's political system. Moving beyond the "trapped transition" paradigm, they assess whether democracy will emerge from incremental political change in China.

Several scholars survey the terrain of ideology and political culture, delineating the ideational boundaries of political reform in China. Andrew Nathan's analysis of political and academic discourse reveals a thorough absence of enthusiasm for Western-style democracy (competitive elections for public office), remaining nominally dedicated to their own conception, namely CCP leadership, plus consultation. In contrast, Yu Keping offers an optimistic assessment of the Party's ideological incorporation of such concepts as rule of law (*fazhi*), private property (*siyou caichan*) and harmonious society (*hexie shehui*), implementation of which is realizing "incremental democracy". Yu concludes that this gradually negotiated expansion of political inclusion, while carefully protecting pre-existing interests, means that "inner-party democracy" and grass-roots democratic experimentation may eventually produce expanding political competition and the free election of political leaders. Indeed, Chu Yun-han argues that a social basis exists for such a transition. His illuminating comparison of public orientations to authority in 1980s Taiwan and today's PRC shows parallel trends away from authoritarian values as a result of socio-economic modernization. Nevertheless, these findings reveal a critical tension between protecting elite interests and satisfying broader constituencies.

How might different social groups' competing interests affect reform of the political system? Cheng Li's chapter on China's "Fifth Generation" of leaders (those raised during the Cultural Revolution) argues that an emerging bipartisanship within the Party between two dominant factions with Communist Youth League and coastal-city career backgrounds could constitute the basis for future electoral competition. This pluralism informs policy-making, enhanced by broadening educational backgrounds as social science and management majors supplant the formerly dominant technocratic engineers. Barry Naughton's