

**Gunter Schubert and Anna L. Ahlers, *Participation and Empowerment at the Grassroots: Chinese Village Elections in Perspective***

**(Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012), 242p. \$85 hardback; \$84.99 eBook**

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The study of Chinese village elections has gone through various stages in the past two decades or so, but one issue that scholars have been grappling with is what these elections really mean to Chinese political development. For example, the question of whether village elections would create momentum or motivation for both the center and the citizens to push democratic elections one level above in towns/townships, has been resolved. In recent years, scholars have paid more attention to the contribution of village elections to the changing state-society relations and local political dynamics by looking at the issues of political values and trust, contentious politics, post-election administration, and so forth.

Schubert and Ahlers's new book represents one of these efforts to make sense of village elections in the broader political and economic context. However, different from most other works, they address a significant issue that has not been fairly and sufficiently treated – the impact of village elections on the political legitimacy of the Chinese party state. The main goal of the book, as the authors outline in the beginning, is to “sort out the relationship between *participation* and power in the local state, in the sense of an assumed link and shifting relations between *political awareness* and *political legitimacy*, triggered by direct village elections and post-election administration.” To answer this question, the authors have conducted semi-structured interviews from 2002 to 2005 in six villages from three provinces (Guangdong, Jiangxi and Jilin) representing different levels of socioeconomic statuses, to assess political knowledge, democratic awareness, efficacy, and participation of peasants, village cadres, and higher-up officials.

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Before analyzing the interview data, the authors briefly describe the evolution of grassroots administration and governance in China, with a focus on how the concept and structure of self-government have been treated by the government at different times (Chapter 2). In general, although the center was never able to fully penetrate the layers of administration and reach the grassroots, it had never successfully or wholeheartedly adopted an institutional arrangement for local autonomy. In this sense, that the village elections were written into law in the 1980s represents a milestone in Chinese political history. In fact, the authors devote one chapter (Chapter 3) to discussing the sinuous path that led to the passage of the provisional Organic Law, its implementation despite many difficulties in the 1990s, and its formalization in 1998 and revision in 2009.

Chapter 4 offers by far one of the most comprehensive reviews of the existing academic literature on village elections. It starts with the scholarly work in early years surrounding the issues of why elections were instituted, under what conditions elections were more competitive and participation was more active, and how elections changed village political dynamics. Next the authors delve into the literature that treats village elections as an independent variable and examines its influence on political awareness, political and village citizenship, and political legitimacy. Despite offering an excellent summary of the existing literature, however, this section lacks critical analysis and more importantly, falls short of demonstrating the linkage between the majority of the scholarly findings with the authors' own argument. Readers may benefit even more from an analytic discussion, based on the diagram (p55) of the relationships among the implementation of village elections, participation, political awareness, and political legitimacy. Without this analysis, it makes it difficult to make sense of the data analysis in the next chapter.

In Chapter 5, the authors present the findings from their interview data, which are then summarized and analyzed in Chapter 6. In general, the findings illustrate that: 1) elections are carried out on a regular basis and follow an increasingly standardized procedure; 2) both the electorate and the elected cadres have developed a certain level of knowledge of elections and awareness of their rights and obligations; however, 3) the empowering effect of elections for peasants is overestimated, as for many, elections themselves do not seem to change their lives in any obvious way. For the authors, regular and standardized elections do help establish peasants' trust in local officials and therefore increase system legitimacy, as seen in the villages in Jilin. However, it is the economic resources in Shenzhen, and cooperation between formal and informal institutions in Jiangxi, that mostly help sustain local political legitimacy in other places.

I wish that the authors would have taken advantage of their case research to offer more detail and stories to illustrate the interactions of electoral participation, empowerment and legitimacy, instead of drawing conclusions solely on the quantitative results from a total of 206 respondents. Nonetheless, this book offers an excellent review of the current status of the field, and presents some interesting findings and discussion on the impact of village elections on peasants' sense of empowerment and the state's political legitimacy. It would be a good selection for graduate students and scholars who are interested in studying rural politics in China.

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