

Village Elections and the Prospect of Rural Politics Studies in China

Gunter Schubert and Anna L. Ahlers: Participation and Empowerment at the Grassroots: Chinese Village Elections in Perspective, Lexington Books, Lanham, MD, 2012, 242 pp, \$85, ISBN: 978-0739174791

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Granted by the Organic Law on Villagers' Committees, village elections have been held in rural China for almost 30 years. Given its large scale—ballot boxes open to 600 million peasant voters every 3 years—and its significance to the daily welfare and political rights of many peasants, village elections have been an important topic for scholars of Chinese politics. Schubert and Ahlers's book represents one of the efforts to make sense of village elections, i.e., asking what these elections really mean to Chinese peasants and to Chinese politics. Different from previous authors who focused on individual attitudinal changes after elections such as political efficacy and trust, Schubert and Ahlers bring the research agenda further to examine whether and how the changing political attitudes as a result of village elections may have exerted any impact on regime legitimacy. There are two possible scenarios. First, village elections may have helped peasants hold grassroots cadres more accountable and responsive to citizen needs, thus facilitating popular trust in political institutions and regime support. Second, village elections may have enhanced the peasants' sense of empowerment and democratic orientation so much that peasants would like to bring grassroots democracy up to a higher level. But when such an upgrade of political reform does not lie on the horizon, the ensuing popular frustration may create a risk to regime legitimacy. Using qualitative data collected by the authors in six villages of three provinces (Guangdong, Jiangxi, and Jilin) between 2002 and 2005, the authors have depicted the characteristics of popular attitudes toward rural politics and analyzed the link between village elections and political legitimacy in today's China.

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Scholarly studies of village elections have gone through several stages, each of which reflecting the socioeconomic and political contexts at the time and the changing attitudes and expectations of scholars for village elections. Research questions in the 1990s concentrated on two related aspects. First, numerous publications were dedicated to explaining the motivations of the CCP and the process of installing the institution of village elections. On the one hand, village elections could be seen as a sign of democratization in China. But on the other, that such direct elections were allowed first in rural China seems to go against the modernization theory. Second, in the decade after the draft Organic Law was passed in 1987, some local governments showed more reluctance than others to allow elections, which triggered scholarly interest in explaining what led to (a better) implementation of competitive village elections. Local socioeconomic conditions were often used as explanatory variables, as the social mobilization theory suggests.

After the Organic Law was formalized in 1998 and elections had been held in most provinces, some scholars turned to the issue of voter participation. After all, participation determines the significance of the elections. But who votes in rural China, and why? The huge political science literature on electoral studies offers models and tools to study electoral participation in rural China, which also bridges the gap between China studies and disciplinary studies.

Since the late 1990s, the majority of research in the field has tried to discern what changes village elections have brought to peasants and to local power politics. Some research focused on individual political attitudes such as efficacy and trust over local governments, while others were concerned about the shift of power among villager committees, village party branches, informal institutions such as clans and lineages, and town/township governments. As a result of these dynamics in village politics, still others were interested in finding whether public services were improved and village cadres were held more accountable.

Schubert and Ahlers's book joins the last group of research projects by placing village elections as an independent variable and looking at its effects on four dependent variables, including political participation, political awareness, citizenship and regime legitimacy. It is argued that the quality of electoral procedures along with conventional conditions such as socioeconomic status may explain the level of voter turnout. Through participation, voters would gain a better understanding of electoral and other political institutions at the village level and would possibly become more aware of public affairs during elections. If electoral institutions are free and fair, voters would trust the institutions more and regard the regime as more legitimate. But if the expected institutions are rigged or denied, peasants may feel deprived of their rights and interests and may engage in resistance movements and demand what is known by academics as citizenship. For the authors, both regime legitimacy and citizenship may have an impact on a fifth dependent variable, stability, although this correlation is mainly discussed on a conceptual level.

Although the authors' data were collected in 2002–2005, some findings on the features of village politics still resemble those in some regions today: (1) elections are carried out on a regular basis and follow a rather standardized procedure; (2) both the electorate and the elected cadres have developed a certain level of

knowledge on elections and awareness of their rights and obligations; however, (3) overestimating the empowering effect of elections for peasants is to be cautioned as for many, elections themselves do not seem to change their lives in any obvious way, although abolishing elections would possibly make their lives worse and thus is viewed as unacceptable. 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 solid cooperation between formal and informal institutions (in Jiangxi) that mostly help to sustain the local political legitimacy in other places.

China's vastness and its high-speed change are two foundational challenges to understanding rural politics or any aspect of Chinese development. Conclusions drawn from in-depth regional data may speak for the region but not the huge nation, while nationwide survey research may lose some contextual richness and analytical in-depth. Schubert and Ahlers have made efforts to counter the challenge by intentionally collecting data in regions of varied socioeconomic and cultural conditions in order to reveal the dynamics of rural politics across regions and levels of development. Still, as institutions change, what seem to be solid findings then would also need to be adjusted now. It was around the same time as the authors collected their data that the agricultural taxes and fees were completely abolished in China. Township and village cadres used to depend on such fees to finance public services and to fund their salaries, which created a taxation-based commitment to accountability and responsiveness. Now that grassroots cadres depend on budgets provided by county offices, the commitment to serving village public goods is diminished. It is more rational for township cadres to delegate more responsibilities to village cadres, who then shift the pressure to sub-village or "natural village" unit leaders. The accelerated shift of rural labor to urban regions in the last decade only deteriorated the hollowing out of village governance. As a result, in villages without substantial collective revenues, elections have lost their audiences who would rather tend their own business.

But even the observation above is limited in that it certainly does not reflect the whole picture of rural politics. In Chengdu, Sichuan province, suburban villages have received an annual public welfare fund of at least 200,000 *yuan* from the municipal government since 2009. The availability of such funds attracted the villagers' attention to village public affairs and made them more active in participation of the various political institutions including the elections. Similar to the Guangdong cases in the authors' book, collective revenue has become a catalyst to public interest in village affairs.

Village elections have been paid enormous attention by Western scholars, partly because they are viewed as a possible sign of democratization in China. The expectation, as seen in Schubert and Ahlers's questionnaires, is that peasants may want to level up the elections to township governors as a result of experiencing village elections. There are two problems with this assumption. First, the fact that some peasants expressed positively about electing upper-level governors may not speak for their increased demand for political rights. After all, they may have felt the same before village elections were held. Second, Western democracy that treats procedural election as its core element may not fare well at every level of

bureaucracy in China's fragmented system. In particular after the cancellation of agricultural taxes and fees, the townships depend more heavily on allocated budgets from county governments, not to mention the fact that township governments have always been an implementing agency for counties. Elections of township governors may not be as effective and meaningful to rural peasants as elections of villager committees in holding politicians accountable and responsive. Given county governments' significant decision-making authority, elections of county governors should be a much more meaningful choice if one looks up to any local political change. For that reason, it is worth noting that a recent publication based on quantitative data does prove that having experienced village elections leads one to favor county-level elections (Sun 2014). In fact, the authors of the book recognized the limitedness of focusing only on village elections in studies of village governance, both in the Outlook chapter and in another publication of theirs (Schubert 2009).

Recent publications on village governance have also shifted from elections to other village-level institutions such as deliberative democracy. In Chengdu, in response to increased peasant interests in distribution of the public welfare funds, village deliberation councils (*cunmin yishihui*) were established. Smaller than the villager representative assembly, the councils invited villager representatives and other interested villagers to discuss budgets and expenses. Similarly, in Yunfu, Guangdong, village councils of the respectable (*xiangxian lishihui*), including trustworthy village elders, returned migrant workers, village-originated bureaucrats and businessmen, have been established for deliberation on important village affairs. These deliberative mechanisms have somehow diverted the power of decision-making from the elected village cadres but enabled a more transparent and open decision-making process, which helps to address the common issue that elected village administration is not held accountable in some rural places.

As village elections were initiated by peasants but picked up and institutionalized by the CCP 30 years ago, the party has recently called for enhancing deliberative democracy at the community level in both rural and urban areas as a way to facilitate communication between the public and the authorities. However, it remains to be seen whether the "socialist deliberative democracy" is another strategy of the CCP to preempt on potential sources of social instability. Thirty years ago, it was due to the party's need to quiet down rural tension and help the center hold grassroots cadres accountable that the party agreed to implement village elections. The instrumental logic still applies, if not more so, in today's grassroots politics.

A more significant development in rural politics as in other areas of Chinese politics today is that *the party* has advanced and intensified its grip on day-to-day administrative operations and social development, especially at the grassroots level. The installation of party cells in the New Economic Organizations and New Social Organizations (*liangxin zuzhi*) is an example. Encouraging local party committees to develop their affiliated NGOs has been shown to be another (Thornton 2013). Then in rural politics, as called for by the CCP's directives and illustrated by Gunter and Ahlers's findings, the party's role in village governance has been further enhanced. Many villages have the same cadres in charge of both party branches and

villager committees. If not, party secretaries are generally regarded by peasants as the *yibashou* or the predominant political figure. What these changes imply about village elections is that, as much as the elections have increased peasants' political awareness and citizenship, political changes in rural China, if any, would depend on the socioeconomic changes in rural areas and on the subsequent changes of political dynamics, of which village election is both a cause and a result.

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