

## Village Governance and Prospects for Democracy in China

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**He Baogang and Lang Youxing**, *Xunzhao minzhu yu quanwei de pingheng—Zhejiang sheng cunmin xuanju jingyan yanjiu* [*In Search of a Balance between Democracy and Authority—Study on the Experiences of Zhejiang Province in Village Elections*] (Wuhan: Huazhong shifan daxue chubanshe, 2002), 5 + 423 pp., RMB 30.00. ISBN: 7-5622-2591-5/D 136

Although village elections are regarded as the core of the widely publicized basic-level political reforms in the People's Republic of China (PRC), this field has so far been dominated by single case-studies from Chinese authors with only a few larger surveys conducted mostly by Western researchers. Only recently has this begun to change as a number of more detailed accounts of village governance in general and village elections in particular has been published. One of the most prominent institutions in the field, the China Rural Problems Research Center at Huazhong Normal University in Wuhan, has edited an influential book series in which the reviewed volume was published. This book deserves special attention for two reasons. Firstly, it is the first monograph to be written in Chinese by two Western-trained political scientists. He Baogang (Australia National University) and Lang Youxing (Zhejiang University) now both also affiliated with the Rural Problems Research Center, are well-known for their English-language publications on issues of democratization and nationalism in China and are well-equipped to bring new theoretical depth to the study of village elections. Secondly, their focus on one particular province transcends the case-study approach and thus holds the promise to produce more conclusive results on the impacts of village elections on local politics and society. The authors have studied Zhejiang village politics since 1994 and collaborated with Zhejiang University in conducting three larger surveys between 1998 and 2000. Throughout the book He and Lang interpret this data, which is well-documented, and make conscientious use of a wide array of publications to put their findings into the local context of Zhejiang province and to draw comparisons with other parts of China.

The major thesis of the book is that the reforms at the base of the PRC's political system are driven by the need to find a balance between democratic participation and citizens' rights on the one hand and state and Party authority on the other. This

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point is argued in considerable detail throughout the book which consists of four major parts. Chapter one discusses the electoral process in Zhejiang villages and points to the progress in several technical aspects which was achieved through propagation by state agencies like civil affairs departments. However, the crucial stage of candidate nomination and selection is still seen as being too much controlled by Party and state administrations and several other problems persist. In particular, the authors point to the fact that the original criteria to win a seat were in practice considerably lowered: because of the difficulty of winning an absolute majority of the votes cast in the first round, successful candidates in the second round commonly only need a relative majority as long as they gain more than a third of the votes (pp. 113–114). In other words, the legal requirement of an absolute majority is transformed into a qualified relative majority requirement in practice. Research conducted by this reviewer shows that this altered requirement is by no means particular to Zhejiang; instead it is included in election regulations for two thirds of China's provinces.

The second chapter is devoted to the relationship of township cadres, economic development and family clans on the one hand and village elections on the other. The survey shows that a suspicious attitude to elections is still widespread among township cadres, but that the situation has begun to change. A growing number of township cadres applies seemingly democratic practices to rid themselves of villagers' councils they deem not co-operative enough (pp. 151, 310). That these township-organized votes of recall often do not suffice prescribed legal and democratic standards because they only involve the village representatives, not all voters, is implied in another part of the study (p. 316), but not discussed any further by the authors. With regard to economic development the authors show that villagers have stronger incentives to use their active and passive voting rights in economically more advanced villages than in poorer ones. However, they find no strong correlation of economic development and the degree of democracy involved in village elections (p. 179). In other words, the heightened interest in political participation and contestation does not yet translate into effective claims for higher procedural quality in village elections. Yet, significantly differing outcomes for villages which depend predominantly on agriculture or on (private) enterprises show a certain dynamic in this direction. Family clans and lineage groups seem to be of secondary importance for voting decisions, but against common wisdom of growing civic independence, this influence remains high even after several rounds of elections (p. 204). Nevertheless, voters' perception of procedural fairness seems to be detached from clan influences (p. 198).

The third chapter on democracy addresses in turn participation, women's issues, competition, impacts on power structures and the village representative assemblies (VRA). The authors provide detailed information on participation. Unfortunately, at least one of the five questions used to construct a comprehensive index to measure levels of participation in elections is dubious: It awards more points (meaning higher participation) to people who simply give more reasons for participating in voting without considering the quality of the answer. For instance, the answer 'I wanted the candidate I trust in to be elected' receives the same weight as the answer 'The cadres told me to vote', and the interviewee gets two points for ticking

both boxes (pp. 10, 406). Therefore, the discussion based on this index rests on shaky ground. Women's participation is generally only slightly lower than men's, yet their representation in village committees is minimal. The authors see progressively more competition and meaning in village elections since real power is redistributed through this process. However, they acknowledge that these elections might lead to the entrenchment of village elites, at the expense of ordinary villagers' political participation (p. 308). This problem is also raised with regard to VRAs (p. 329), yet is not explored in depth. Instead the authors portrait the VRA as a largely effective limiting factor on village cadre conduct.

Perspectives of future developments are dealt with in the last chapter which recollects two experiments with direct elections to the position of township head and discusses broader theoretical questions. Although the authors analyze the reform efforts from the viewpoint of democratization theory the Chinese Party-state, as it emerges from their own analysis, only reluctantly gives its citizens enhanced opportunities for political participation and merely if it serves at the same time to strengthen its authority at the basic-level of rural society. To reconcile this finding with a general, however slow, thrust towards democratization perceived by the authors they use the last section of the book to argue for a new model of democracy which emerges from the Chinese experience and which they call 'developmental democracy' (*fazhan zhong de minzhu*). This model is basically characterized by the pattern of first institutionalizing procedures resembling a democratic system (i.e. elections) and incrementally raising the level of democracy involved through more openness, competition etc. (p. 383). He and Lang defend this incrementalist model with the need to adapt the notion of democracy to Chinese circumstances and argue that democracy should be conceived as a process rather than measured statically (as the existence of certain constituting criteria in the political system). Ultimately, they confess to preferring a liberal model of democracy and see the developmental model as ground-breaking in this direction, although they emphasize that liberal democracy should not *ex ante* be seen as the only possible outcome of democratization (p. 382). While most readers in the West will subscribe to the vision of a slowly evolving democratic China as a desideratum, one can wonder where the driving forces for such a change might come from. This book does not point to sufficient evidence of such forces to sustain high hopes for democratization any time soon, and the readers may or may not be inclined to join the authors' half-full interpretation of recent developments in village governance. Furthermore, it could be argued that a system which does not even profess the basic elements of democracy like electoral competition for national leadership, should best not be labeled with the term 'democracy' whichever qualifications might be added. Ironically, in doing so He and Lang commit themselves to the same historical teleology as the supporters of liberal democracy they criticize. Nevertheless, with its in-depth treatment of a single province and its thought-provoking main thesis this is a highly valuable contribution to the literature on village governance in contemporary China deserving wide readership.