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Kevin J. O'Brien, Suisheng Zhao (eds.), *Grassroots Elections in China*

New York, Routledge, 2011, 235 pp.

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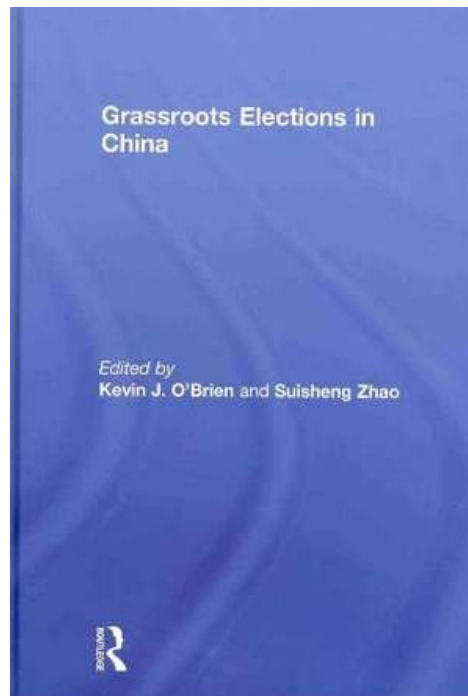
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- 1 It is not only discoveries and advances – modest or major – that make for the march of science, which actually takes place discontinuously, punctuated by pauses, retreats, and ruptures. In this slow process of knowledge acquisition, it is desirable that a scholar – preferably a community of scholars sharing the same scientific objective – pauses to take stock. This brief but willing halt is essential for what Karl Popper called “critical attitude,” which is at the heart of the “scientific attitude”; evaluating the state of knowledge and methodology and testing (on one’s own or with others) the results obtained are the strong points of the research process. Moreover, it is the surest way of reviewing the issue. The book under review resolutely follows this procedure: no new hypothesis or new ground is covered in this book; rather, it is in the form of an assessment.



- 2 More than 20 years after the promulgation of the first – so-called experimental (*shixing*) – law on elections to village committees (1987), it is certainly necessary to take stock of the far-reaching changes in China’s rural configuration, politically as well as

economically and socially, and to present the results of many field investigations in the interim. This book edited by Kevin J. O'Brien and Zhao Suisheng (political science professors at the University of California, Berkeley, and University of Denver respectively) acquits itself superbly in this task, offering a highly useful compendium to experts in the field and setting out for beginners an introduction to the subject's constituents with remarkable clarity.

- 3 This quality work consists of four parts: the first two – the most stimulating – focus on village committee elections in their purely political aspects; the third assesses the links between economics and village elections; and the fourth part, with just two chapters, looks into county- (*xian*) and township-level (*xiang*) elections. All the chapters, except the introduction, were previously published in the *Journal of Contemporary China* between 1999 and 2010.
- 4 The vague title points straightaway to the difficulty in coming to grips with the issue of local elections in China. The term “grassroots” might suggest it is merely a “local” affair, giving such elections a low status in terms of political institutions. Such a reading of the term might be justified to the extent that it includes both the village and township levels, and this “descriptive” approach has the added advantage of being based on ground realities. But “grassroots” also conveys the idea of people, even civil society – either already active or emerging. In that case, the issue would be one of societal role in such elections, or rather, democratisation. Such an approach risks leaning towards the prescriptive. The authors make no real attempt to dispel this vagueness, although that would have been welcome.
- 5 From the studies presented, which can only be considered briefly, it would seem that the phenomenon of village committee elections is hard to nail down, and that its effect on the political system as a whole cannot yet be grasped clearly. Whereas in liberal democracies the term “election” *ipso facto* implies the idea of freedom and of the people's power, in China the term is much more equivocal. It might convey the idea of democracy's growth as if it were the same as the construction of an authoritarian state. While it remains quite a task for scholars to resolve these two perspectives, the many quantitative as well as qualitative investigations undertaken over the past 20 years offer quite a clear vision now of the elections carried out in China's 600,000 or so villages – of the system's successes (multiple and more liberal candidatures, often respected secrecy of voting, gradual replacement of mobile ballot-stations, increasing adoption of the polling booth...) and weaknesses (vote-buying, literacy tests for candidates, obstruction and verbal or physical intimidation of candidates...). However, Kevin O'Brien and Han Rongbin note that the available studies dwell too much on electoral procedures, glossing over the exercise of power. They envisage a future for more detailed studies on democratic governance in the villages, or in other words, on elections' impact on the way power is wielded. While not disagreeing, Tan Qingshan stresses that the desire for greater focus on the post-electoral period must not neglect the fact that democratisation's core lies in the institutionalisation of rules, which is the only way to foster a democratic culture. He also says that local democracy could make decisive strides through the creation of a national commission to oversee elections; however, there is no guarantee that the Party would hand real power to such an institution. Björn Alpermann, for his part, questions the extent of disconnect between elections and post-electoral government as set out by O'Brien and Zhao. In his view, the exercise of authority implies a deeply procedural dimension, and the provinces are the

major forces behind the institutionalisation of rules for governing villages, necessitating a consideration of other players in local politics. Gunter Schubert, among others, does just that by promoting a more systematic study of county and township level governments and of Party organs in elections and in village governance.

- 6 Several authors stress the elections' positive effect on cadres' attitudes. The elections were adopted and accepted by many cadres seeking to entice the electorate through policies more in conformity with expectations. This touches on the system's greatest contradiction: the village cadres not only act as representatives of the villagers but also have the task of applying central government directives, especially with regard to birth control. This can be a source of much tension and makes the village chief's job unenviable. David Zweig and Chung Siu Fung also point to the need to take into account economic factors in local power struggles: to cite just one observation, contrary to some accounts, villagers' growing affluence does not weaken demands for democracy or the aspiration for well-established procedures.
- 7 This book has its weak points. In terms of presentation, it is regrettable, for instance, that there is a near total absence (at least in the first two chapters) of iconographic material such as diagrams, tables, and illustrations that might have helped demonstrate the issues. As for the substance of the book, it is even more unfortunate that the studies presented make little attempt at a comparative approach. Some mention the need to study Taiwan's experience, for instance, but fail to really follow up on this logic. A comparison between the Chinese situation and other political configurations and historical trajectories could help better grasp the import and impact of some institutional arrangements, or at least shift the focus and avoid hasty conclusions. It could also throw up heuristic perspectives in fact and open new lines of research for Sinologists. The process leading to the politicisation of French peasants after the Second Republic, for instance, is now well known and has generated some daring but certainly stimulating hypotheses that could be tried out in China. Maurice Agulhon, a historian specialising in the Second Republic, has shown that the voter does not make the election, but rather "the election makes the elector." Politicisation thus works by "impregnating," the electoral institution serving as a powerful vector for transforming political attitudes. In fact, says Agulhon, "enjoying the right to vote means using it, learning how to benefit from it, and thus learning to discuss and debate public affairs – to participate in politics, in short."¹ In the same vein, Patrick Lagoueyte showed that the process of politicisation of peasants went on under the authoritarian Second Empire, despite the phenomenon of "official candidates" in elections, something akin to "Party candidates" in Chinese villages. Such examples are new paths for Sinologists to explore. They point to the conclusion that a reorientation of studies on rural Chinese elections must doubtless include a more systematic comparative study. Despite these few failings, however, *Grassroots Elections in China* is an indispensable work for anyone interested in the ongoing massive changes in China's rural areas.

NOTES

1. Maurice Agulhon, *Histoire vagabonde*, vol. 3, Paris, Gallimard, 1996, p. 72
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