

## **Understanding China's Grassroots Elections**

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## ***Understanding China's Grassroots Elections***

In his widely-read book, *The China Fantasy*, James Mann argues that a 'soothing scenario' of gradual, inevitable democratization dominates American views of China's future. In this sunny outlook, grassroots elections enjoy a special place. They are a 'panacea' that reassures us that China is heading in the right direction and a reason we need not be too dismayed about China's authoritarian present: better days are to come. Although Mann rejects nearly everything associated with this scenario, he maintains that many China watchers and influential Americans — from a string of US presidents, to business elites and consultants, to pundits and leading academic experts — subscribe to it.<sup>1</sup>

Mann has clearly not been reading the essays in this volume. All of them were published from 1999-2009 in the pages of the *Journal of Contemporary China*. Like most works on grassroots elections, they present a sober, not overly soothing view of what has been happening on the ground and what it adds up to. Some of the authors consider the implications of elections for regime-level transformation but none deem democratization 'inevitable' or 'automatic.' Instead, the spread of local balloting is understood to have brought about a significant adjustment in state-society relations that may have as much to do with authoritarian resilience<sup>2</sup> as with democracy.

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<sup>1</sup> James Mann, *The China Fantasy: How Our Leaders Explain Away Chinese Repression* (New York: Viking, 2007). On village elections as a 'panacea', see pp. 18-20.

<sup>2</sup> For this term, see Andrew J. Nathan, 'Authoritarian resilience', *Journal of Democracy* 14(1), (January 2003), pp. 6-17.

Elections, in these accounts, reflect the stop-and-go progress of political reform itself. Not a sham, they are, like other liberal institutions in an illiberal polity, part of a strategy designed to help one-party rule endure. Big, unintended consequences may yet emerge, but to this point, local elections operate in a limited context and have local effects. From their beginnings, elections arose out of a state-building as much as a democratizing impulse,<sup>3</sup> and, several decades later, they may be legitimating the current regime rather than serving as a harbinger of systemic change.<sup>4</sup>

Beyond their unblinkered view of political reform and its implications, what else do the authors in this volume share? And what future do they suggest for the next generation of election studies?

### **Methods and Approaches**

In this remarkably busy field, a number of trends are apparent. For one, research methods are changing. Quantitative studies, based on surveys, are increasingly common. At least two or three survey teams are in the field at any time and both local and national surveys of election procedures and popular attitudes toward elections have

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<sup>3</sup> Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, 'Accommodating "democracy" in a one-party state: introducing village elections in China', *China Quarterly* 162, (June 2000), pp. 488-89. Frank N. Pieke, 'Contours of an anthropology of the Chinese state: political structure, agency and economic development in rural China', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 10(3), (2004), p. 521.

<sup>4</sup> So, Mann is both right and wrong. He is correct that his "third scenario" (persistent authoritarianism) is the most likely medium-term outcome. But he has not noticed that among China scholars this scenario is also the betting favorite. Even for those who study protest, and who might be expected to espouse his 'upheaval scenario,' this view has been edging from consensus to near unanimity, and perhaps should be revisited for just this reason. For tentative signs of such a questioning, see Andrew J. Nathan, 'Authoritarian impermanence', *Journal of Democracy* 20(3), (July 2009), pp. 37-40.

been completed.<sup>5</sup> This research is a welcome addition to a literature that at first depended on findings from a handful of locations visited for a short time, supplemented by archival materials. As the essays by Tan and Xin, Zweig and Chung, Rong Hu, and Shi show, survey-based analyses are very much the wave of the present and, taken together, are making headway on an issue that case studies cannot: how to generalize about all (or a subset) of the hundreds of thousands villages and urban locations where elections take place. Moreover, as Melanie Manion explains in her contribution, much remains to be done, even if nationally representative samples cannot always be drawn and local probability sampling must be relied on to illuminate ‘patterns and trends’ and ‘temporal and cross-sectional variation.’ Beyond competitive elections and their relationship to economic development, which is examined in Part III of this collection, Manion reminds us that surveys are well-suited to examine the electoral connection between voters and candidates and to ‘systematically investigate the contextual effect of the local power configuration on governance.’

While surveyers are searching for patterns and adding breadth to our knowledge, others are investigating events in a single location.<sup>6</sup> In this volume, ‘attention to local particularities’ is represented by Zongze Hu’s ethnography of a Hebei village. Hu’s participant observation uncovers what elections mean to villagers and leaders in one

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<sup>5</sup> For a recent nationwide survey of village elections, see ‘Sample survey data on the status of Chinese villager self-governance’, The Carter Center, 27 July 2009, available at <http://en.chinaelections.org/NewsInfo.asp?NewsID=20561> (accessed 8 August 2009).

<sup>6</sup> For an example, see Xueguang Zhou, ‘“Can a falling leaf tell the coming of autumn?” Making sense of village elections in a township . . . and in China’, in Jean C. Oi, Scott Rozelle, and Xueguang Zhou (eds.) *Growing Pains: Tensions and Opportunity in China’s Transformation* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2009).

community, and illustrates how factional cleavages and lineage identities can rise to the surface when balloting and governance occur. Such studies, often conducted by anthropologists or sociologists, promise more consideration of the lived experience of elections and signal a new interest in biography, local micro-histories, and cultural practices. In a field still dominated by political scientists, they help us understand why, institutional reforms aside, some voters continue to believe that elections are not a viable way 'to choose popular and competent cadres.' Accounts that focus on grassroots participants are especially apropos now that a good amount of time has passed since elections were revived in the late 1970s. Voting has a history, and issues that turn on perceptions, like apathy, trust, support, and legitimation, should be examined in specific communities as well as generally.<sup>7</sup>

Hu's call to consider 'the views and voices of those most affected' can also be addressed by paying more attention to election day. After a strong start in the 1990s, election observation has fallen out of fashion. Early monitoring efforts, organized by the Carter Center and International Republican Institute, could be profitably updated by on-the-spot observers who examine, for example, the details of vote-counting, proxy

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<sup>7</sup> On apathy, see Jie Chen and Yang Zhong, 'Mass political interest (or apathy) in urban China', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 32, (1999), pp. 281-303; and Tan and Xin in this volume. On trust, see Melanie Manion, 'Democracy, community, trust: the impact of elections in rural China', *Comparative Political Studies* 39(1), (April 2006), pp. 301-24. On support, see Jie Chen, 'Popular support for village self-government in China: intensity and sources', *Asian Survey* 45(6), (December 2005), pp. 865-85. Legitimation is one of the hottest topics in the study of grassroots politics. See Gunter Schubert and Chen Xuelian, 'Village elections in contemporary China: new spaces for generating regime legitimacy? Experiences from Lishu county', *China Perspectives* 3, (2007), pp. 12-27; Stig Thøgersen, 'Parasites or civilisers: the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party in rural areas', *China: An International Journal* 1(2), (September 2003), pp. 200-223; and the essays by Schubert and Kennedy in this volume.

voting, and the disappointment of voters, who after hours of waiting, often hear the words 'wuxiao' (no result), because the 50% threshold for a valid election has not been met.<sup>8</sup>

Other approaches also deserve more representation. A rich sociology of elections would illuminate the effects of voting on various social groups. Jude Howell, in this volume, and Baogang He have led the way on womens' under-representation on village committees,<sup>9</sup> but we also need studies that examine what minorities, migrant workers, and religious believers make of elections, and how their position in society is affected (or not) by them.

Finally, some approaches and methods remain almost entirely absent from the literature on grassroots elections. The first articles by economists and game theorists are just beginning to appear.<sup>10</sup> Historians, for their part, have been noticeably silent on the antecedents of today's elections and studies based on experiments, such as Guan

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<sup>8</sup> On a 2002 election observation trip, see Kevin J. O'Brien, 'Improving election procedures: some modest proposals', unpublished paper, 23 April 2006, available at [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=1157092](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1157092) (accessed 13 August, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> Baogang He, *Rural Democracy in China* (New York: Palgrave, 2007), chapter 8. For studies of female political participation, see Weiguo Zhang, 'Marketization, democratization, and women's participation in village elections in contemporary rural China: a study of a north China village', *Journal of Women, Politics and Policy* 28(2), (2006), pp. 1-28; M. Kent Jennings, 'Gender and political participation in the Chinese countryside', *Journal of Politics* 60(4), (November 1998), pp. 954-73; James Tong, 'The gender gap in political culture and participation in China', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 36(2), (2003), pp. 131-50.

<sup>10</sup> Loren Brandt and Matthew A. Turner, 'The usefulness of imperfect elections: the case of village elections in rural China', *Economics and Society* 19(3), (November 2007), pp. 453-80. Hiroki Takeuchi, 'A game theoretic analysis of China's village elections', paper prepared for the *Annual Conference of the Midwestern Political Science Association*, Chicago, 12-15 April 2007.

and Green's on the effects of door-to-door canvassing on voter turnout,<sup>11</sup> have broken new ground but have yet to be emulated.

### **New Topics**

Research topics are also changing. Careful examination of election procedures (Tan, chapter 6) and a lively debate over whether richer or poorer villages hold better elections (Zweig and Chung, chapter 11; Hu, chapter 12; Shi, chapter 13) is giving way to a focus on the consequences of balloting. Consequences, in the contemporary way of thinking, are understood broadly, including effects on: the 'exercise of power' (O'Brien and Han, chapter 1);<sup>12</sup> relations between elected bodies and Party organizations (Guo and Bernstein, chapter 10; Tan and Xin, chapter 8); procedural aspects of post-election governance (Alpermann, chapter 5); corruption;<sup>13</sup> land allocation;<sup>14</sup> fiscal transfers;<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Mei Guan and Donald P. Green, 'Non-coercive mobilization in state-controlled elections; an experimental study in Beijing', *Comparative Political Studies* 39(10), (2006), pp. 1175-93. Turnout in local people's congress elections has been a popular topic for survey researchers, and has led to disagreement over how to interpret a person's decision not to vote. See Tianjian Shi, 'Voting and nonvoting in China: voting behavior in plebiscitary and limited-choice elections', *Journal of Politics* 61(4), (November 1999), pp. 1115-39; Jie Chen and Yang Zhong, 'Why do people vote in semicompetitive elections in China?' *Journal of Politics* 64(1), (February 2002), pp. 178-97. On turnout for village elections, see Yang Zhong and Jie Chen, 'To vote or not to vote: an analysis of peasants' participation in Chinese village elections', *Comparative Political Studies* 35(6), (August 2002), pp. 686-712.

<sup>12</sup> See also Björn Alpermann, 'The post-election administration of Chinese villages', *China Journal* 46, (July 2001), pp. 45-67.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Levy, 'Village elections, transparency, and anticorruption: Henan and Guangdong provinces', in Elizabeth J. Perry and Merle Goldman, eds., *Grassroots Political Reform in Contemporary China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 20-47.

<sup>14</sup> Janet C. Sturgeon, 'Quality control: resource access and local village elections in rural China', *Modern Asian Studies* 43(2), (2009), pp. 481-509; John James Kennedy, Scott

regime legitimacy (Schubert, chapter 3; Kennedy, chapter 4); feelings of empowerment;<sup>16</sup> and the development of citizenship consciousness.<sup>17</sup> Several recent studies have also stressed that elections are just one means to enhance accountability, and perhaps not the most effective one.<sup>18</sup>

For most researchers, grassroots elections mean village elections: a vast majority of studies of Chinese elections focus on village committees. A series of experiments with electing township leaders has produced a small literature, represented by Dong Lisheng's contribution to this volume.<sup>19</sup> Local people's congress (LPC) elections are also gaining a spot on the research agenda, as seen in He Junzhi's essay on four types of independent candidates. More studies like He's are desirable insofar as LPC elections

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Rozelle, and Shi Yaojiang, 'Elected leaders and collective land: farmers' evaluation of village leaders' performance in rural China', *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 9(1), (Spring 2004), pp. 1-22.

<sup>15</sup> Shuna Wang and Yang Yao, 'Grassroots democracy and local governance: evidence from rural China', *World Development* 35(10), (2007), pp. 1635-49.

<sup>16</sup> Lianjiang Li, 'The empowering effect of village elections in China', *Asian Survey* 43(4), (July/August 2003), pp. 648-62.

<sup>17</sup> Kevin J. O'Brien, 'Villagers, elections, and citizenship in contemporary China', *Modern China* 27(4), (October 2001), pp. 407-35. Baogang He, *Rural Democracy in China*, chapter 3.

<sup>18</sup> On the limited effect of democratic institutions on public goods provision, compared with temple and lineage groups, see Lily L. Tsai, *Accountability without Democracy: Solidary Groups and Public Goods Provision in Rural China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), chapter 7. On religious practices substituting for elections, see Stephan Feuchtwang, 'Peasants, democracy and anthropology: questions of local loyalty', *Critique of Anthropology* 23(1), (2003), pp. 93-120.

<sup>19</sup> Lianjiang Li, 'The politics of introducing direct township elections in China', *China Quarterly* 171, (September 2002), pp. 704-23; Tony Saich and Xuedong Yang, 'Innovation in China's local governance: open recommendation and selection', *Pacific Affairs* 76(2), (Summer 2003), pp. 185-209; Baogang He, *Rural Democracy in China*, chapter 12; Lianjiang Li, 'Direct township elections', in Elizabeth J. Perry and Merle Goldman, eds., *Grassroots Political Reform in Contemporary China*, pp. 97-116; Stig Thøgersen, Jorgen Elklit, and Dong Lisheng, 'Consultative elections of Chinese township leaders: the case of an experiment in Ya'an, Sichuan', *China Information* 22(1), (2008), pp. 67-89.



have drawn only sporadic attention since the early 1980s, even as research on other aspects of congresses, such as lawmaking and oversight, has taken off.<sup>20</sup>

With knowledge of grassroots elections mounting, the time has come for more comparison, both domestically and internationally. Within China, elections to urban self-governance institutions should be considered alongside their rural counterparts.<sup>21</sup> Consecutive, different types of elections also suggest a natural experiment that is too good to pass up. In some localities, elections to county people's congresses and village committees take place several weeks apart, have the same districting and sometimes the same candidates, yet are conducted with strikingly different procedures. (In 2002 in Yunnan, for example, village committee elections were nearer to international standards on nominating procedures, primaries, and secret balloting than people's congress elections, and civil affairs staff were more attuned to the requirements of free and fair voting than people's congress staff).<sup>22</sup> There are also many locations where village elections were held for some years, but now, owing to administrative

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<sup>20</sup> Young Nam Cho, *Local People's Congresses in China: Development and Transition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Ming Xia, *The People's Congresses and Governance in China: Toward a Network Mode of Governance* (London: Routledge, 2008); Kevin J. O'Brien, 'Local people's congresses and governing China', *China Journal* 61, (January 2009), pp. 131-41. For early studies of LPC elections, see Brantly Womack, 'The 1980 county-level elections in China: experiment in democratic modernization', *Asian Survey* 22(3), (March 1982), pp. 261-77; J. Bruce Jacobs, 'Elections in China', *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 25, (January 1991), pp. 171-99. For more recent treatments, see Melanie Manion, 'Chinese democratization in perspective: electorates and selectorates at the township level', *China Quarterly* 163, (September 2000), pp. 764-82; An Chen, *Restructuring Political Power in China: Alliances and Opposition, 1978-1999* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1999), chapter 3.

<sup>21</sup> For a pioneering effort, see Robert Benewick, Irene Tong, and Jude Howell, 'Self-governance and community: a preliminary comparison between villagers' committees and urban community councils', *China Information* 18(1), (2004), pp. 11-28.

<sup>22</sup> O'Brien, 'Improving election procedures'.

reclassification, balloting takes place under less democratic urban rules. Such disparities offer a direct opportunity to explore the effects of differing procedures on voter interest, political participation, and accountability.

Beyond China, a dialogue should also be pursued with those who study local elections in other authoritarian regimes, past and present.<sup>23</sup> There is much to be gained by viewing China's experiences with elections beside those of Vietnam, Cuba, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Historical cases in East Asia (most notably, Taiwan), and even in Western Europe and Latin America before the advent of democracy, also promise to reveal much about how culture, institutional legacies, and historical accidents affect the role that elections play in illiberal polities.

International comparison can also help dispel misunderstandings about democratization. A broad field of view reveals that 'authoritarian elections are neither rare nor . . . inevitably undermining to autocrats' and that China's Communist Party is hardly an outlier in using elections to 'hold onto power'. As the chapters in this book make clear, regime breakdown and democratization are possibilities for China, but the more pressing questions today center on the persistence of authoritarian rule. In Gandhi's and Lust-Okar's words: 'Although elections sometimes may foster democratization, it is no longer easy to assume that elections necessarily undermine authoritarian regimes; in fact, the opposite generally appears to be true'.<sup>24</sup> Taking China's grassroots elections for what they are, rather than what they might become,

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<sup>23</sup> For a review of this literature, see Jennifer Gandhi and Ellen Lust-Okar, 'Elections under authoritarianism', *Annual Review of Political Science* 12, (2009), pp. 403-22.

<sup>24</sup> For the quoted text in this paragraph, see Gandhi and Lust-Okar, 'Elections under authoritarianism', pp. 404 and 417.

allows the authors in this collection to sidestep teleology and contribute to the discussion about the origins, dynamics, and consequences of political reform in authoritarian states.