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REVIEW ESSAY

HUNTING FOR POLITICAL CHANGE

Kevin J. O'Brien

Political Participation in Beijing, by Tianjian Shi. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1997. xv + 334pp. US\$22.95 (paperback).

The Politics of Lawmaking in Post-Mao China: Institutions, Processes, and Democratic Prospects, by Murray Scot Tanner. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998. 240pp. US\$55.00 (hardcover).

Over the past dozen years, political reforms in China have failed to make as much headway as some observers had expected.¹ And it goes without saying that Deng's final years were not a time in which "people power" transfigured the regime. Yet according to the two books under review, China is anything but politically stagnant. If the impetus behind political change is neither top-down reform nor bottom-up revolution, what is it?

For Tianjian Shi and Murray Scot Tanner the current political structure is still full of potential. Far-reaching political reforms (or revolution) may one day transform China, but in the meantime ordinary citizens and élites are making do. Beijing residents are skilfully working the system to protect and

¹ "During the late 1980s, before the Tiananmen tragedy, optimism about the Chinese Communist Party's potential for political evolution was at its zenith. Many felt that the CCP would be at the vanguard of political reform among communist parties..." Bruce J. Dickson, "China's Democratization and the Taiwan Experience", *Asian Survey*, vol.38, no.4 (April 1998), p.349.

further their interests. Members of the National People's Congress are pursuing the legislature's mission and seeking as best they can to accrue some semblance of power. The contours of Chinese politics are gradually shifting as formerly marginalized individuals take advantage of small pullbacks and little more than a slightly softened authoritarianism. Without fanfare, and without influential sponsors, a "quiet revolution from within"² has begun.

What have Shi and Tanner unearthed by digging deeply into everyday political processes? Can "reform without reformers" and the exploitation of existing channels reshape the political order?³

Working the System

Tianjian Shi reports on a survey of 757 Beijing residents conducted in 1988 and early 1989. The picture that emerges is unmistakable: people in Beijing were politically engaged and feisty but not overly threatening to the regime. Most urban dwellers were willing to participate in the political process, such as it is, instead of waiting for sweeping institutional reforms. In this regard, Shi challenges the common view that Chinese have generally shunned public life since the Cultural Revolution and are uninterested in politics.⁴ He found that only one-tenth of his sample were utterly apathetic, while a full three-quarters of the respondents had undertaken at least one voluntary political act other than voting between 1983 and 1988.

And the word "voluntary" is key. Shi politely but relentlessly engages James Townsend's early work on political participation.⁵ For Shi, mobilization is no longer the heart of the story. Instead, Beijing residents pursue diverse, autonomous forms of participation while "creatively respond[ing] to structural constraints". The implication is that dramatic democratic reforms are not a precondition for meaningful popular involvement in politics. The absence of nationwide popular elections does not rule out significant change. Even the tiniest steps from plebiscitary to limited-choice elections trigger heightened interest, be it choosing work unit leaders or local people's congress deputies.

² For this term, see Andrew G. Walder, "The Quiet Revolution from Within: Economic Reform as a Source of Political Decline", in Andrew G. Walder (ed.), *The Waning of the Communist State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp.1-24. See also David S. G. Goodman and Beverley Hooper (eds), *China's Quiet Revolution* (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1994).

³ This question may become academic if Jiang Zemin promotes real political liberalization, as some have speculated he may.

⁴ Other studies that found relatively high levels of participation and interest include M. Kent Jennings, "Political Participation in the Chinese Countryside", *American Political Science Review*, vol.91, no.2 (June 1997), pp.361-72; Yang Zhong, Jie Chen and John M. Scheb II, "Political Views from Below: A Survey of Beijing Residents", *PS*, vol.30, no.3 (September 1997), pp.475-76.

⁵ James R. Townsend, *Political Participation in Communist China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).

Beijingers eagerly use the ballot to punish those they dislike, and they campaign, albeit privately, for those they prefer. Many urbanites are quite willing to contest electoral manipulation, and nearly 5 per cent have gone so far as to organize election boycotts. Nearly half have pursued appeals through the bureaucracy and many have done so through trade unions, political organizations and people's congresses.⁶

While making the most of approved channels, people in Beijing relish exploring the limits of the permissible. In fact, less institutionalized forms of participation have a particular prominence in China. Compared to citizens of other countries, Beijing residents have a penchant for acts that require initiative, entail risk, and generate conflict: "Whereas the majority of people in liberal democracies participate in politics through voting, campaign activities, communal activities and particularized contacts, people in China rely primarily on appeals, adversarial activities, resistance and cronyism to fight for what they want". If this is more than a comment on the ineffectiveness of government-sponsored channels, it is a startling finding in a nation where the risks of participation are real and conflict with one's superiors can lead to harassment and reprisals.

Shi's analysis has a neo-institutional flavour. Throughout, he underscores the environment in which participation unfolds and the limits that continue to exist. An institutional perspective also leads him to a welcome dash of speculation on how structural changes since 1988 (such as moving away from lifetime employment, or weakening the *danwei*) might today affect the findings of a similar survey.

Shi sensibly steers clear of the higher reaches of government and focuses on efforts by ordinary citizens to influence grass-roots officials. Beijingers know that their chances are best in the politics of daily life. Unfortunately, his research design does not permit an assessment of how well political participation actually works. The temptation therefore must be resisted to "connect the dots" and to link increased citizen assertiveness with regime change: as Shi is the first to admit, his findings do not portend imminent democratization or even the early rumblings of group-based politics. This is a book about popular attitudes and strategies rather than systemic change.

Shi adopts a broad "multi-dimensional" definition of political participation. This enables him to examine twenty-eight different acts, ranging from

⁶ On appeals, see Yasheng Huang, "Administrative Monitoring in China", *The China Quarterly*, no.143 (September 1995), pp.834-35; Wenfang Tang and William Parish, *Market Transition in Urban China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming), chaps. 6 and 8; Kevin J. O'Brien, "Rightful Resistance", *World Politics*, vol.49, no.1 (October 1996), pp.31-55; Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, "The Politics of Lodging Complaints in Rural China", *The China Quarterly*, no.143 (September 1995), pp.756-83. On legal remedies, see Benjamin L. Liebman, "Class Action Litigation in China", *Harvard Law Review*, vol.111, no.6 (April 1998), pp.1523-41; Minxin Pei, "Citizens v. Mandarins: Administrative Litigation in China", *The China Quarterly*, no.152 (December 1997), pp.832-62.

voting for people's congress deputies to participating in anti-regime demonstrations.⁷ Above all, Shi makes it clear that state-society relations are often highly contentious. Cadre-mass interactions have become more open-ended and less mediated than they were in the Maoist era. Street-level officials are often freer to be predatory or corrupt, to act like "local bullies"; and ordinary citizens are frequently in a better position to defy them and to push back.⁸ When both sides are evenly matched, the skirmishes can be fierce and the outcome difficult to predict.

Refreshingly, Shi resists romanticizing the urban populace's grass-roots actions. "Whipping up public opinion" can involve manufacturing corruption charges or spreading scandalous stories about a factory manager's wife. Innuendo, slander and blackmail are all useful tools when seeking to undermine the powerful. At times, Shi breaks away from his data to relate accounts of revenge exacted by citizens against leaders who had purged them, or a worker's threat to drink a bottle of DDT if a salary increase is not granted on the spot. He persuasively demonstrates that hardball tactics are not the province of elites alone; that a reforming authoritarian state and its "imperfect institutions" can generate intense confrontations and a highly theatrical form of politics.

Each of the middle chapters shares a similar format: Shi lays out a set of hypotheses drawn from assorted theories. Then he suggests how these hypotheses can be tested, at least partially, by questions included in the survey. Next, he offers a table of significant independent variables. Finally, he attempts to tease out why these variables (both hypothesized variables and those discovered in the data) have explanatory power. This approach yields a cornucopia of findings that literally pour off the page. It also produces a book that requires considerable concentration to read all the way from front to back.

Some of the more intriguing findings include a handful that relate to gender and political participation. Women, it turns out, are more likely than men to write to government officials or newspaper editors, to make reports to complaint bureaus, and to seek audiences with higher authorities, perhaps because they are inclined to believe government promises. People whose mothers are white-collar workers are more likely to engage in resistance, perhaps because they have more contacts in the government and have less fear of retaliation insofar as their mothers will back them up. Women in the 72-82 age bracket are particularly disposed to lodge appeals, perhaps because of

⁷ On resistance strategies and their origins, see Elizabeth J. Perry, "'To Rebel is Justified': Maoist Influences on Popular Protest in Contemporary China", *Hong Kong Journal of Social Science*, forthcoming.

⁸ On "bullies" in the Republican era, see Prasenjit Duara, "State Involution: A Study of Local Finances in North China, 1911-1935", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol.29, no.1 (January 1987), pp.155-57. On "bullies" today, see Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, "Selective Policy Implementation in Rural China", *Comparative Politics*, forthcoming.

their involvement with neighbourhood committees during the Cultural Revolution and their subsequent opposition to forced retirement.

Of course, some will question Shi's interpretations, if not the raw data itself. For this reason, although multi-variate analysis is typically used to test hypotheses, this book may make its largest contribution by generating hypotheses. It should be a rich source for research topics, both for people with a quantitative bent and even more for those with qualitative inclinations. The latter will be driven to conduct in-depth interviews to see if, for instance, working class authoritarianism discourages workers from mobilizing public opinion in favour of factory slowdowns. Only such interviewing will ultimately provide a deep, nuanced understanding of what is occurring, why it occurs, and what participation means to those who pursue it.⁹

A few words should be included about the survey. That the questionnaire was distributed not long before the protest movement of 1989, with the help of two people who would later be condemned as "black hands", and that the completed questionnaires were hand-carried out of China just days after the shooting erupted, is a testament to Shi's pluck and adaptability. At the same time, Shi knows that Beijing is not representative — that its citizens "are considered the most politically sophisticated and outspoken people in the country", and that a small survey conducted during a liberal interregnum is hardly definitive.¹⁰

But how far the findings travel is not as problematic as the pattern of assertiveness that emerged. The survey showed that regime-challenging actions are rare and that protest activities are usually individualized and directed against work-unit leaders rather than the political system itself. This is somewhat surprising given that the events of spring 1989 unfolded a scant four months after the questionnaires were completed. For all Shi's evidence of citizen assertiveness, only 0.5 per cent of the respondents had taken part in a demonstration between 1983 and 1988.

This finding is not as puzzling as it seems, however. As Shi is at pains to emphasize, the questionnaire asked about *behaviour* over a five year period, not about popular attitudes and beliefs. Thus, we learn less about what people desired than what they were willing to risk. From 1983 until 1988 this did not include mass demonstrations; by the spring of 1989 it did. Although *Political Participation in Beijing* ostensibly concerns mass behaviour, it also reveals

⁹ For such an approach to participation, see Diane Singerman, *Avenues of Participation: Family, Politics and Networks in Urban Quarters of Cairo* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

¹⁰ Others have argued that "Beijing residents are often considered the best candidates for research on political attitudes in the PRC", because they are knowledgeable about politics and are a "barometer" for the mood elsewhere. Jie Chen, Yang Zhong, Jan Hillard and John Scheb, "Assessing Political Support in China: Citizens' Evaluations of Government Effectiveness and Legitimacy", *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol.6, no.16 (November 1997), p.557.

much about the ups and downs of China's "political opportunity structure".¹¹ It clarifies what the leadership allows or cannot prevent, the popular response to cycles of opening (*fang*) and closing (*shou*), and the limits of the permissible. It shows what can happen when institutional space appears and savvy citizens try to work a reforming authoritarian system to their minimum disadvantage.¹²

And it is not just scrappy urbanites who are busy creating and occupying institutional space. Certain political insiders have also gained more room to operate. If for Shi, the Party-state as a whole has pulled back and ordinary citizens have filled the void, for Murray Scot Tanner the Party has pulled back and state bureaucracies and formerly weak institutions like the National People's Congress (NPC) have filled the void. Once again, splashy political reforms are not the driving force. The rise of the NPC is mainly a consequence of decentralization, bureaucratic rivalry, and Party members in the legislature working to amass organizational power. The normalization of moderate dissent has little to do with a commitment to the rule of law or a new-found affection for pluralism. In fact, the heroes of the story, "the principal builders of China's chief organ of socialist democracy", are not liberal reformers but bureaucrats who spent much of their careers at the epicentre of classic totalitarianism, in the political-legal system (*zhengfa xitong*).¹³ Again, we see a pattern of reform without reformers — inadvertent change as a result of the grinding away of "quiet politics".¹⁴

For Tanner, a legislature's policy role and its links to society can grow without ending one-party rule or institutionalizing responsiveness. How the NPC's delegates and its Standing Committee members are chosen, for instance, is less important than what they do.¹⁵ Even without direct, competitive

¹¹ A political opportunity structure includes: institutional access, shifting alignments, emerging conflict among elites, and available allies. See Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), chap.5.

¹² See E. J. Hobsbawm, "Peasants and Politics", *Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol.1 (October 1973), p.13; and James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990). For a subtle discussion of the interplay of elite and mass initiative, see David Zweig, "Rural People, the Politicians, and Power", *The China Journal*, no.38 (July 1997), pp.153-68.

¹³ For a political biography of one such person, see Pitman B. Potter, "Peng Zhen: Evolving Views on Party Organization and Law", in Carol Lee Hamrin and Timothy Cheek (eds), *China's Establishment Intellectuals* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1986), pp.21-50; also Pitman B. Potter, "Curbing the Party: Peng Zhen and Chinese Legal Culture", *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol.45, no.3 (May-June 1998), pp.17-28.

¹⁴ On changes in "the practical structure of the Chinese state" resulting from a quiet reallocation of resources, see Kate Xiao Zhou and Lynn T. White III, "Quiet Politics and Rural Enterprise in Reform China", *Journal of Developing Areas*, vol.29 (July 1995), pp.461-90.

¹⁵ On people's congress elections, see Brantly Womack, "The 1980 County-Level Elections in China: Experiment in Democratic Modernization", *Asian Survey*, vol.22, no.3

elections to nurture accountability, legislators can exploit an erosion of Party control to rethink their roles. In recent years, many delegates have become less concerned with pleasing central leaders and instead have chosen to represent organizational, sectoral, regional and societal interests. Some remonstrate for individuals or groups to whom they feel some attachment.¹⁶ Others speak up for bureaucracies or for the legislature itself. Although the NPC continues to be led by Party leaders vetted by the Centre, its members have their own policy agendas and their own motives for expanding the boundaries of the permissible.

Tanner's NPC is above all an organization manoeuvring to secure a place in the bureaucratic thicket:¹⁷ it is run by individuals who typically lack other outlets for their ambition and who have much to gain from enhancing the congress's position. These refugees from ministries or from Party work possess expertise and are not always reliable agents of their former employers. A retired Minister of Transportation, for instance, used his NPC sub-committee perch to attack a law drafted by his former ministry that would have weakened port access by other ministries. More dramatically, China's former Justice Minister and other political-legal officials successfully used an NPC sub-committee to resist the Ministry of Public Security's post-1989 crusade to forbid all public demonstrations.

As these examples suggest, the NPC is becoming a serious venue for leadership debate. Tanner claims, in fact, that the legislative body "has emerged as the most open, permeable, and therefore potentially risky policy arena of the Party-State".¹⁸ Policy advocates who meet resistance in the State

(March 1982), pp.261-77; Barrett L. McCormick, *Political Reform in Post-Mao China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp.130-56; J. Bruce Jacobs, "Elections in China", *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, no.25 (July 1991), pp.171-200; Andrew J. Nathan, *Chinese Democracy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp.193-223; Kevin J. O'Brien, *Reform Without Liberalization* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp.61-65, 127-37; Robert E. Bedeski, "China's 1979 Election Law and Its Implementation", *Electoral Studies*, vol.5, no.2 (August 1986), pp.153-66.

¹⁶ On China's tradition of moderate remonstrance, see Andrew J. Nathan, *China's Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p.183; and Kevin J. O'Brien, "Agents and Remonstrators: Role Accumulation by Chinese People's Congress Deputies", *The China Quarterly*, no.138 (June 1994), pp.359-80.

¹⁷ Local people's congresses face similar problems. See Ming Xia, "Informational Efficiency, Organisational Development and the Institutional Linkages of the Provincial People's Congresses in China", *Journal of Legislative Studies*, vol.3, no.3 (Autumn 1997), pp.10-38; Kevin J. O'Brien and Laura M. Luehrmann, "Institutionalizing Chinese Legislatures: Trade-Offs Between Autonomy and Capacity", *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, vol.23, no.1 (February 1998), pp.99-102; Kevin J. O'Brien, "Chinese People's Congresses and Legislative Embeddedness: Understanding Early Organizational Development", *Comparative Political Studies*, vol.27, no.1 (April 1994), pp.80-107.

¹⁸ Cf. Barrett L. McCormick and David Kelly, "The Limits of Liberalism", *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol.53, no.3 (August 1994), p.818. On "arenas" in an earlier era, see

Council or Party Centre often steer proposals toward the NPC, where they enjoy greater influence and can obtain a second hearing. Legislative leaders frequently delay or amend a draft law after it has been approved by the State Council and Party Centre. Opponents may demand that a law be implemented in a limited number of locations indefinitely, or insist that other legislation be enacted before a law takes effect. Apparently, at least two pieces of legislation have been flat-out rejected by the Standing Committee. Ordinary NPC delegates, for their part, are increasingly willing to vote "no" or abstain. From 1992 to 1995, the full NPC dissented on draft legislation at annual rates of 33, 8, 22 and 29 per cent. And when opposition is more muted, Tanner tells us, it is often because the drafting ministry or State Council Legislation Bureau has overhauled a bill in order to forestall an embarrassing public display of dissent in the NPC.

Tanner's book comes alive in the chapters on the Bankruptcy Law and the State-Owned Enterprise Law. Although these tales have been told before,¹⁹ his blow-by-blow accounts of the drafting process are likely to stand as definitive. Extensive interviews with Cao Siyuan, an architect of the Bankruptcy Law, are put to particularly good use. Though Tanner may have been overly charmed by this charismatic and self-promoting "policy gadfly", an important point emerges. Organizational missions should be explored, and policy making is usually a slow, incremental tug-of-war characterized by inter-agency bargaining.²⁰ But individuals can also make a difference. Although bureaucratic titans dominate law-making, policy entrepreneurs can link independent streams of solutions and problems,²¹ particularly during agenda-setting, before a proposal is married off to a bureaucratic patron. People such as "Bankruptcy Cao" can repackage a pet policy proposal and market it as a cure-all for different audiences and problems. What was sold yesterday as a spur to technological innovation, today increases state revenues, and tomorrow

Michel Oksenberg, "The Chinese Policy Process and the Public Health Issue: An Arena Approach", *Studies in Comparative Communism*, vol.7, no.4 (Winter 1974), pp.375-408.

¹⁹ See, for instance, Ta-kuang Chang, "The Making of the Chinese Bankruptcy Law: A Study in the Chinese Legislative Process", *Harvard International Law Journal*, vol.28 (Spring 1987), pp.333-72. A remarkably lively account can be found in Cao Siyuan, *The Storm Over Bankruptcy (I) and (II)*, in Catherine H. Keyser (ed.), *Chinese Law and Government*, vol.31, nos 1 and 2 (1998).

²⁰ Bureaucratic approaches are explored in Kenneth G. Lieberthal and David M. Lampton (eds), *Bureaucracy, Politics, and Decision Making in Post-Mao China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); also Kenneth Lieberthal and Michel Oksenberg, *Policy Making in China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

²¹ Tanner promotes the "garbage can model" of organizational choice. See Michael Cohen, James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, "A Garbage Can Model of Organizational Choice", *Administrative Science Quarterly*, vol.17, no.1 (March 1972), pp.1-26. For a critique of the model's "rigor, discipline, and analytic power", see Jonathan Bendor, Terry M. Moe and Kenneth Shotts, "Recycling the Garbage Can: An Assessment of the Research Program", Stanford Business School Working Paper Series, 1996, p.1.

will improve factory management. The notion of policy entrepreneurship helps account for rapid shifts and for ideas catching fire without organizational backing. It suggests a need to fine-tune bureaucratic models, which tend to pick up the story during inter-agency consensus-building and to downplay the role of non-bureaucratic groups and interests. Policy entrepreneurship in China deserves further attention. Beyond its frequency and role, I would like to hear more about its risks: the danger of walking among the elephants, which may have contributed to Cao's stint in prison after 1989.

Much of Tanner's book resembles the primer *To Enact a Law*.²² He proceeds step-by-step through the legislative process and explains how a bill becomes or fails to become a law. Tanner explores the motives for building a law-making system and painstakingly identifies the parties involved and their relations. He produces more detail than ever before on the criteria for selecting members of the NPC Standing Committee, the operation of Party groups within the legislature, and the mistaken assumption that the Central Political-Legal Leading Group plays a central role in legislative drafting.²³ He also documents the growth of the NPC bureaucracy and sub-committees, and shows that the legislature now has a fighting chance to stand up to the ministries and to the State Council Legislation Bureau in determining the content of laws.

The analysis is less persuasive, however, for what it implies about the role of law in the system writ large. Law-making is undoubtedly a "multi-stage, multi-arena process"; some key players undoubtedly believe that "politicking within the NPC is no longer a waste of time"; and laws undoubtedly have become a vehicle by which the leadership considers, debates and adopts policy departures. But can we draw a straight line from the NPC's role in law-making to its role in the exercise of power?²⁴ Do the compromises reached in the legislature truly structure behaviour, limit discretion, and determine the allocation of resources? How important are many of the laws the NPC passes for what happens on the ground? Tanner acknowledges that the legislature participates little in drawing up implementing regulations, and that some of its laws are honoured only in the breach.²⁵ Even the two laws that the NPC influenced most did not amount to much in practice, by Tanner's own account.

²² Robert L. Peabody, Jeffrey M. Berry, William G. Frasure and Jerry Goldman, *To Enact a Law* (New York: Praeger, 1972).

²³ Cf. Shiping Zheng, *Party vs. State in Post-1949 China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997): "The Party's Political and Legal Affairs Committee and the Party core group are still in charge of the state judicial and legislative institutions" (p.189).

²⁴ On the relationship between policy and law, see Stanley Lubman, *Bird in a Cage: China's Post-Mao Legal Reforms* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, forthcoming), chap.5.

²⁵ On weak legal implementation, see Donald C. Clarke, "The Execution of Civil Judgments in China", *The China Quarterly*, no.141 (March 1995), pp.65-81.

For a law to affect how power is wielded, a ministry, the State Council Legislation Bureau, or a central patron has to champion it, and enforcing agencies must also do their bit. This sometimes does not occur, especially in contentious policy areas where the NPC's involvement is likely to be most pronounced. Perhaps this is why Party leaders outside the political-legal complex pay only sporadic, heavily staff-assisted attention to law-making: they know that whatever emerges from the NPC affects practical policy only at the margins (though much more than it did in the past). As long as some laws can be ignored or appallingly misimplemented, and as long as many extra-legal channels for policy-making exist (for instance, Party edicts, leadership speeches, editorials by special commentators, pledges made on inspection tours), some may wonder what all the fuss is about.

Tanner is far bolder than Shi in relating his findings to systemic transformation. For one, he argues that the NPC's policy-making role has been institutionalized. Attitudinal and structural barriers now make it difficult to recentralize power over law-making. Whereas for Shi, political cycles still affect the ebb and flow of political participation, for Tanner organizational processes have produced enduring changes that enable the NPC to weather anti-liberal campaigns and shocks such as June Fourth, 1989.

Institutionalization not only means a stronger legislature; the NPC's "secular growth" has implications for China's democratic prospects. According to Tanner, "Windows are being opened and frameworks built through which portions of the Party-state leadership can establish links to China's rapidly evolving society, and groups within that society can strengthen their influence over government". In Tanner's view, legislative change is drawing China to the precipice of fundamental transformation, and an empowered parliament may ease that transformation when it comes. The NPC may even provide a meeting ground for the regime's reformers and moderate critics to negotiate a "pacted" transition. Though Tanner stops well short of predicting democratization, he notes that related developments in Leninist legislatures in Poland, Hungary, Taiwan and the Soviet Union prepared the way for the electoral reforms that ultimately ushered in democratization.

Both Tanner and Shi might have devoted more attention to the qualitative leap that a popular election of top leaders constitutes — and more attention to what the lack of such a leap means. Amoeba-like movement by incrementally less-constrained political actors can certainly make a difference. But a careless reader might conclude that everyday organizational processes or citizens' manoeuvres within the system may dismantle one-party rule while no one is looking. That may happen, but my guess is that unintended consequences and "reform without reformers" can only take things so far. Both authors know that democracy requires systemic, non-incremental change and an opening to society beyond increased political participation and institutionalized legislative influence. Perhaps it is time to reconsider the role of Leninism and

the upper limits of “creeping democratization”.²⁶ Following Daniel Kelliher’s lead, we might start by examining the Chinese leadership’s understandings of democracy and the largely instrumental aims that stand behind, for example, the promotion of village elections.²⁷ Such an inquiry could reveal much about the prospects for systemic transition and the depth and width of what Tanner aptly calls the “electoral rubicon”.

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²⁶ See Minxin Pei, “Creeping Democratization in China”, *Journal of Democracy*, vol.6, no.4 (October 1995), pp.65-79. For doubts about elections “creeping up the political system as do vines up a trellis until they engulf the entire structure”, see Dickson, p.358.

²⁷ Daniel Kelliher, “The Chinese Debate Over Village Self-Government”, *The China Journal*, no.37 (January 1997), pp.63-86. See also Jean C. Oi, “Economic Development, Stability and Democratic Village Self-Governance”, in Maurice Brosseau, Suzanne Pepper and Tsang Shu-ki (eds), *China Review 1996* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1996), pp.125-44; Kevin J. O’Brien, “Implementing Political Reform in China’s Villages”, *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, no.32 (July 1994), pp.33-60; Amy B. Epstein, “Village Elections in China: Experimenting with Democracy”, in U.S. Congress, Joint Economic Committee, *China’s Economic Future* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1996), pp.403-21.