

Politische Partizipation und Regimelegitimität in der VR China. Band I: *Der urbane Raum* (Political Participation and Régime Legitimacy in the PRC. Vol. I: Urban China), by Thomas Heberer and Gunter Schubert. Wiesbaden: VS-Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2008. 226 pages. €39.90 (paperback), also available as an e-book; Band II: *Der ländliche Raum* (Political Participation and Régime Legitimacy in the PRC. Vol. II: Rural China), by Gunter Schubert and Thomas Heberer. Wiesbaden: VS-Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2009. 270 pages. €39.90 (paperback).

Over the past three decades China's basic level governance has seen tremendous changes. While these reforms, particularly those in the countryside, have received considerable attention from Chinese and Western scholars, this publication project is unique because it seeks to comprehensively review and compare rural and urban governance reforms within one analytical framework. Both volumes share the same theoretical approach, and hence the same introduction which lays out the rationale of the study. Institutional changes, the construction of new urban communities (*shequ*) and adoption of village elections in the countryside, are seen as triggering a learning process: political and social participation are on the rise, political knowledge is enhanced and efficacy (the perception of having influence on politics) is strengthened. This learning effect, in turn, lifts political consciousness to a new level by turning subjects into citizens, although in a gradual and so far incomplete way. Ideally, at least from the vantage point of the ruling party, this would lead to increased legitimacy of the system, political trust in its local and national authorities and loyalty toward the Communist Party. In the final analysis, the result would be enhanced régime stability. Thus, in contrast to other authors, Heberer and Schubert do not assume *a priori* that democratic practice will be incompatible with continued one-Party authoritarianism, but rather pursue the question in an open-ended manner. While this goes against the literature on China's transition to democracy, it opens up intriguing new perspectives and places the study in the context of an on-going debate on China's "authoritarian resilience".

The research design adopted for urban and rural areas is similar in that in both cases three field-sites of varying socio-economic development were selected, and semi-structured interviews with resident and officials were conducted. The urban study focuses on Shenyang in the northeastern "rust belt", Chongqing in the west and Shenzhen in the far more developed south. Heberer, the lead author of the first volume, traces the evolution of *shequ* from the late 1990s to the reforms of urban basic-level governance in which residents' committees (*jumin weiyuanhui*) were amalgamated. Although officially defined as a level of "self-administration", in practice *shequ* lack autonomy, resources and capacity to perform their wide-ranging social service functions. Instead they perform unwelcome tasks, such as birth control and public security. Of particular importance in their daily work are their social welfare functions, such as disbursing the minimum living allowance (*dibao*). Checking eligibility of *dibao* recipients can be a very contentious task

and the official state bureaucracy seems happy to thrust this onto the “self-administration” of the *shequ*.

Residents’ participation varied significantly between the field-sites. Respondents in Shenyang displayed a passive attitude and expected the state to act as a paternalistic provider. Their interest was in protection by the state rather than in participation. In Chongqing a more proactive attitude prevailed, but instead of leading to increased participation in the public realm of the *shequ*, it fostered independent activities in the economic field. Also, residents in Shenzhen were particularly uninterested in the *shequ*, focusing their energies instead on homeowners’ associations and other venues of participation. Ironically, then, participation in *shequ* activities was highest in the least developed and most state-dominated case, namely Shenyang, and higher for the socially dependent than for better-off persons. Closer to conventional definitions of political participation, the study also addresses elections at the community level. It finds a low level of political knowledge among residents matching an equally low democratic standard of actual electoral practice. Nevertheless, it is argued that even such orchestrated elections can have an empowering effect in that they initiate learning processes. In this sense, the authors also speak of “proto-political participation” (p. 153). Finally, the first volume also addresses the relationship between citizenship, autonomy and community in urban neighborhoods. Expectations on the part of residents that the state act in a paternalistic manner work as an impediment to rising citizenship, which would involve rights consciousness but also a sense of civic duty. The latter is also hampered by increasing individualism in urban areas. Against such a backdrop, the authors interpret the Party-state’s attempt to construct urban *shequ* as a strategy of “authoritarian communitarianism” (p. 182), including the production of citizenship through a top-down process of education. The conclusion emphasizes the—so far largely unrealized—potential of *shequ* to contribute to widening and deepening participation with the accompanying political learning effects and positive spill-over for régime legitimacy and stability. Some of these inferences could be questioned. For example, it could be argued that a system engaging in birth control is far from developing into a “minimalist state” (p. 193). In the end, it is probably too early to observe far-reaching changes induced by institutional reforms in urban communities because the most crucial one, direct local elections, has hardly been implemented, but this research will serve as a thought-provoking baseline against which future studies can measure the progress made.

The situation in the countryside, where several rounds of direct village elections have been conducted already, is strikingly different. The second part of the study, with Schubert as its chief investigator, first provides an overview of the institutional history of village governance. Then major arguments and findings of previous research are succinctly summarized. With respect to the study variables, this research found increasing participation through elections, rising political consciousness and efficacy and even stirrings of rural citizenship in a more rights-conscious peasantry. Earlier authors differed in their assessment of consequences of elections for legitimacy and stability. These preliminary findings are put to the test in three case-

studies, suburban villages in Shenzhen city (Guangdong), agricultural Fenyi County (Jiangxi) and Lishu County (Jilin), a well-known demonstration-site for village self-administration. In each of these places, interviews were conducted in two villages to give a nuanced picture of political change at the grassroots level. Thus, on the one hand, voting in direct village committee (VC) elections did have an empowering effect and many respondents conceived it as their right. Yet, at the same time, fewer than half the villagers felt that elections had made the VC more responsive and only one third thought that their influence on village-level decision-making had improved. Political knowledge among rural residents was as limited as among their urban counterparts. Residents in Shenzhen's affluent suburban villages seemed to have been bought off by local cadres through dividends disbursed each year. With the transformation of these villages into urban neighborhoods and the associated loss of revenues from land-leases, these officials have reason to worry about future social stability. In contrast, the long history and high quality of village elections in moderately developed Lishu contributed to an increase in legitimacy of and trust in the local state to endure external shocks. The Jiangxi case was different again. Clans and lineages played a greater role in stabilizing social order but, due to the general low level of economic development, they could not be expected to be a buffer in case of an economic downturn. However, villagers still did not display a great interest in local politics, as they were caught up in their daily struggle for survival. In view of these contrasting empirical findings, the authors conclude that the empowerment brought about by elections has not yet led to the rise of rural citizenship. Only in Lishu could they observe a partial horizontalization of relations between voters and officials. As there is no observable pressure for bottom-up democratization in the countryside, they formulate the hypothesis that village elections currently contribute to enhancing the legitimacy and stability of one-party rule. However, in the long run, this effect could only be maintained if political participation becomes more institutionalized and deepens over time.

In the final analysis, in both urban and rural areas the potential for generating legitimacy at the local state level is to be found. But the state will only be able to harness it if more room for political participation is granted and if this in turn leads to a strengthening of rights consciousness and a civic culture.

Based on intensive qualitative fieldwork and a thought-provoking theoretical approach this double-study is a valuable addition to the literature on grassroots reforms in China. It should be widely read and debated.

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Government and Policy-Making Reform in China: The Implications of Governing Capacity, by Bill K. P. Chou. London: Routledge, 2009. xiv + 167 pp. £75.00/US\$125.00 (hardcover).

During the 1980s, China experienced a steady decline in the policy-making authority of the central government as decentralizing reforms moved forward. In order to