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today by Chinese society and the Chinese Communist Party. Liu's case demonstrates that there is still a long way to go towards public and individual freedom in China. His position as an intellectual is not beyond dispute, but nobody can deny his thought-provoking, sharp and brave observations. In short, reading Liu, not as a research scholar but as a political activist who stands for non-violent struggle, is a must for a better understanding of the multiple contradictions of contemporary Chinese society and politics.

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*Participation and Empowerment at the Grassroots: Chinese Village Elections in Perspective*, by Gunter Schubert and Anna L. Ahlers. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012. x + 230 pp. US\$65.00/£39.95 (hardcover), US\$64.99/£39.95 (eBook).

Since the first election took place in Hezhai Village in Guangxi Province in 1980, Chinese village elections have spread throughout the nation and become one of the most researched areas in the study of Chinese politics. Gunter Schubert and Anna L. Ahlers provide a rich and comprehensive discussion of this important topic. They focus on how village elections “impacted on the political legitimacy of officials and governments at the grassroots level” (p. 2). They argue that, although elections are not likely to spread to higher levels of government, “the implementation of direct elections has gone hand in hand with a new sense of individual *empowerment* on the part of the peasants” (p. 160; italics in original) and that village elections contribute to the resilience of one-Party rule, at least in the short term, by bringing stability to rural areas because grass-roots cadres care more about villagers’ interests. They base this argument on surveys and interviews conducted with 179 respondents in six villages across three provinces (two villages in each of Guangdong, Jiangxi and Jilin Provinces). Of the 179 respondents, 45 are from Guangdong (23 from Zhangshubu Village and 22 from Shuijing), 72 are from Jiangxi (36 from Louxia and 36 from Xiagong) and 62 are from Jilin (32 from Huajiadian and 30 from Balimiao). Most (163) of the respondents are villagers, and 16 of them are village cadres. Schubert and Ahlers also interviewed higher-level cadres (6 in Guangdong, 11 in Jiangxi and 10 in Jilin).

Schubert and Ahlers take the introduction of village elections as given and as an independent (exogenous) variable. This research framework is fair, as this political institution was implemented “universally” throughout the nation and one

can say that the variations in its implementation are based on local conditions; however, the framework does have its drawbacks.

Because they take the introduction of elections as exogenous, Schubert and Ahlers are unable to explain why the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) introduced village elections. The literature on comparative authoritarianism has found that most of the authoritarian regimes in the world have some form of seemingly democratic (or pseudo-democratic) institutions, that those institutions are rarely transitional forms of democracy, and that they are means of strengthening authoritarian rule. Following these findings, students of Chinese politics may wonder whether and how village elections—one of the most important democratic institutions—strengthen one-Party rule and how they fit with the CCP's primary goal of regime survival. In other words, one of the most interesting questions that Schubert and Ahlers do not answer is how sincere the CCP has been in pursuing the goal of building legitimacy *vis-à-vis* the institutionalization of authoritarian rule. For example, it may be true that “the overall political authority of the communist party has not shown any signs of serious jeopardy” (p. 47) and that “there are a number of signs that the party's control over local political processes remains intact” (p. 48). I am convinced by the finding that “many [villagers] denied that elections had brought any significant changes to their current situation” (p. 110), but would like to know how the introduction of village elections has led to this result and strengthened one-Party rule. It seems that village elections are self-limited by design for further political reforms. This is unfortunate, because I think that Schubert and Ahlers have not achieved all that they could have, and might have answered many more questions by using their own survey and interview data.

Another unfortunate problem of this book is its organization. After the historical development of village governance (Chapter 2) and the institutional development of village elections (Chapter 3), Schubert and Ahlers discuss separately previous studies (Chapter 4) and the findings based on their field research in six villages (Chapter 5). What should have been done was a comparison of their findings from the field with findings from previous studies. One challenge that students of Chinese rural politics face is that one can find some anecdotal evidence supporting any claim one would like to make, because China is big and contains many villages. One way to overcome this challenge is to conduct rigorously designed probability sample surveys, and another way is to refine a logical explanation of a puzzle observed in a small number of cases by triangulating multiple observations seen in previous studies and in one's own interviews. I sense that Schubert and Ahlers could have crafted richer discussion from their field research than is indicated in the book, by triangulating their findings with the arguments established in previous studies.

This book makes an important contribution to our understanding of village elections and rural politics in China. A comparison with previous studies can

deepen our understanding of the impact of village elections on political participation, political awareness, citizenship, legitimacy and stability in rural areas. With logically drawn hypotheses at hand, Schubert and Ahlers could have solved many puzzles left by previous studies. Now that many studies have reported considerable empirical evidence (both quantitative and qualitative), we need more refined logical explanations to account for the variations observed in empirical evidence.

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*Defending Rights in Contemporary China*, by Jonathan Benney. London: Routledge, 2013. xii + 197 pp. £85.00/US145.00 (hardcover).

In recent years, various scandals—for example, the contamination of milk by melamine at the end of 2008, property and land conflicts, or the high-speed train collision in southern China in 2011—have shocked the entire country. Rights defense entrepreneurs have used these issues to elevate the importance of rights in today's China. Yu Jianrong, Kevin O'Brien and Li Lianjiang have analyzed similar issues using concepts of “lawful rebellion” or “rightful resistance”. The role of law and legal tools play a crucial role in patterns of resistance.

This book, originally a PhD thesis, begins from a different perspective: the issue of rights defense (*weiquan*), rather than resistance. It is the first extensive study of this concept and its interaction with legal issues. The *weiquan* concept has been developed and propagated by the Chinese government since the 1990s. *Weiquan*—as with so many slogans in Chinese politics—has never been specifically defined. Therefore, it remains a rather vague concept, a fact that allows actors to frame it in different ways.

Jonathan Benney's analysis sheds light on “the emergence of new stakeholders in Chinese politics and society” (p. 3). The book is based on four core arguments: (1) the issue of rights defense is fragmented and spawns bargaining among various actors; (2) citizens are successfully manipulating the discourses of rights and rights defense; (3) rights entrepreneurs advocating for others are successful because they not only advocate for rights but also have good connections to the Party-state; (4) the Party-state faces a predicament because, on the one hand, it initiated the concept of rights defense but, on the other, the limits of “rights defence acceptability remain nebulous” (pp. 3–4). Benney states that rights defense is a “distinctive social phenomenon” having its “own practitioners, strategies, language, and relationship with the state” (p. 7). Each activist is framing her or his own rights defense concept and opposing the concepts of other stakeholders.