



UNIVERSITY of HAWAII' I PRESS

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Voting as a Rite: A History of Elections in Modern China by Joshua Hill

Review by: John James Kennedy

Source: *China Review International*, 2019, Vol. 26, No. 3 (2019), pp. 180-184

Published by: University of Hawai'i Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/27098348>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

University of Hawai'i Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *China Review International*

Joshua Hill. *Voting as a Rite: A History of Elections in Modern China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2019. xi, 297 pp. Paperback \$32.00, ISBN 978-0-674-23722-3.

I have been studying village elections in the People's Republic of China (PRC) since 1995, and I have come across a variety of local election interpretations from "democratic voting" to "corrupt undemocratic process." Evidence for both election types exist as well as a wide range of procedures in between. Indeed, some scholars have hailed grassroots elections as "village democracy" while others view these as hollow elections with little meaning or function. Regardless of how western scholars and journalists perceive grassroots or local People's Congress elections, the *intent* of the election laws in the PRC is a key factor in how we interpret these election practices. Local and national elections in China are not new, and when examining election laws in the PRC, it is critical to place these elections in historical context. To this end, Joshua Hill provides a fascinating and sobering account of elections in China from the late Qing to the PRC in the 1990s.

Several scholars have mentioned that despite the competitiveness and open nomination process we observed in PRC village elections, these elections were not intended to democratize China or villages. The central party-government intention was to have villagers select "good" local leaders as well as connect rural residents to the party-state. Although scholars suggest these elections were never intended to express the will of the people, few were able to place the current development of village elections in the political and historical context. Through careful archival examination of voting laws and procedures, manuals, handbooks, newspapers, and personal accounts, Hill offers an engaging intellectual history of elections in China. To my knowledge, this is the first full historical account detailing the introduction and development of elections in China from the 1890s to the 1990s. Hill skillfully uses the historical record to show that for over a century "Chinese political and intellectual elites have held a stable set of attitudes toward and expectations for elections" (p. 5). These attitudes emphasized state-building rather than the will of the people. Moreover, for the late Qing, the Republican, and PRC leadership, "elected bodies were intended to harmonize, regularize and strengthen the communications between the rulers and those they ruled" (p. 70). Thus, Hill provides an important theoretical contribution to the literature on elections in China.

The earliest rational for elections was to select "virtuous" leaders especially after the end of the civil service exam system in 1905. The aim of the civil service exam was to appoint moral leaders well trained in the classics. The new selection procedures allowed a narrow voter registration pool to participate in competitive elections. For example, Tianjin held the first central government-

sanctioned local election in 1907, and less than 3 percent of the population voted in an indirect election. The following year, the central government enacted the first national election law. The intent as well as some of the procedures of the 1908 election law would have implications for the Qing, Republican, and PRC elections. The law limited voter registration and created a two-stage indirect election where voters (about 2 percent of the population) selected candidates for county representatives and then in the second stage these county selectors elected the provincial assembly members. The key point is that the imperial government was able to control the selection of candidates. Moreover, the 1908 election law as well as the proceeding election laws from the 1920s to the 1990s were top-down state-initiated regulations rather than a bottom-up or popular push for greater representation.

Hill demonstrates how the press from the late Qing to the PRC played an important role in shaping public opinion on elections rather than reflecting it. Newspapers such as *Shenbao* and *Shibao* during the late Qing and Republican period frequently ran stories about the elections, candidates, and the process. The rich detail from these publications and individual accounts brings the late Qing and Republican election procedures and intent to life. Hill deftly uses the newspaper archives to show how journalists and editors claimed the right to pass moral judgment on the elections that created lasting impressions shaping public and government discussions of the elections. One of the key criticisms from journalists, editors, and government officials was how campaigning and vote buying corrupted the election process and the ability to select the “right” leaders.

Competitive elections with an open nomination process means the outcome is uncertain. Thus for candidates, the best way to influence the election is through campaigning and/or vote buying. Hill shows how the Qing and Republican leaders decried these corrupt practices because in the end the voters might select the “wrong” candidates. Hill describes a handbook printed soon after the 1908 election law, “Campaigning for Beginners,” that describes how to increase election chances by treating villagers to meals, creating personal networks and making connections with village leaders (p. 95). Within a few years after the first election law, vote buying became prevalent and widespread. Articles in *Shenbao* and *Shibao* condemned the campaign process and associated corrupt practices. The main critique was not that campaigning and vote buying undermine the democratic process, but rather it produced an undesirable outcome by electing immoral individuals into public office. An early supporter of elections, Zheng Guanying, in 1909 observed that “Half of the assemblymen in our country campaigned with cash and the other half made use of personal connections . . . such assemblymen have no morals” (p. 102). For the Qing and Republican leadership, “elections and campaigning were intertwined phenomena, but campaigning was a defect rather than an integral part of the true purpose of

elections" (p. 103). Thus, it was critical to scale back the elections and gain greater control over election competition.

While the intent behind the election laws remained the same, the laws in the 1920s, the 1930s, and into the late 1940s evolved from restricted voter participation in indirect but competitive elections to universal suffrage for noncompetitive direct elections. In the 1920s, during the warlord period (post Yuan Shikai), provinces enacted their own election laws that broadened voter participation and allowed for more direct elections. Still, the problems associated with campaigning and vote buying continued, and the Nationalist government in 1936–1937 wrote new election laws that broke with the previous procedures. These were direct elections with universal suffrage and stricter control over the competition (i.e., candidate selection). "For the first time, an election law placed tools for pre-determining election results in the hands of the state" (p. 178). Government control over the nomination process means that whoever wins in the competitive election, the "right" person will be chosen. Moreover, universal suffrage was adopted to educate the citizens. This educational or tutelage component of elections was essential for citizens to learn and understand state institutions as well as connect the ruled to the rulers. Sun Yat-Sen made this clear in 1920, and this influenced proceeding election laws (p. 176). The elections were designed to legitimize the state and ratify a predetermined slate of candidates (or candidate).

The 1953 PRC constitution maintained universal suffrage and established ever greater control over candidate selection. The PRC election law introduced the single candidate elections (*deng'e xuanju*). Hill points out that "this particular innovation, in which only one candidate was nominated for each open office, completed the transformation of elections from a choice into an acclamation of a person already selected by other means" (p. 197). This system of elections is maintained in the PRC, but the indirect elections from the 1908 law also remains. The National People's Congress members and Provincial People's Congress members are indirectly elected. However, the members of local People's Congresses and urban residence committees and village committee members are directly elected.

Hill's argument applies to recent changes in local grassroots elections. In 1998, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officially changed the election formula at the grassroots level and enacted the Organic Law of Villager Committees allowing villagers to openly nominate candidates and participate in direct competitive elections (*cha'e xuanju*). These openly competitive elections *only* occurred at the grassroots level. For some Chinese scholars and many outside observers, this seemed to be a possible evolution of local elections in China. However, the Organic Law never reached beyond the village. In the 2000s and the 2010s, reports of widespread vote buying and corruption in village elections in state controlled press increased. Newspapers, like the *People's Daily*,

clearly state that the problem is these grassroots elections are allowing the “wrong” people to get elected. There are *no* reports of vote buying at the town, county, or municipal levels because these are noncompetitive elections with guaranteed predetermined outcomes. As a result, the central and local governments enacted the “sweep away corrupt groups and eliminate evil” campaign (*saohei chu'e*) that specifically calls for ending the competitive grassroots elections that allow “hoodlums” to control village committees. The solution is “One Shoulder Carrying Two Roles” (*yi jian tiao*) where the village party secretary is elected and serves as the village leader. In these elections, villagers ratify the selection of the party secretary to also serve as village leader. While competitive village elections still occur, more are being replaced with the “one shoulder” method. Like the previous Qing and Republican leaders, the CCP scaled back the local election procedures to obtain the desired election outcome.

Although Hill does mention Taiwan in the last section of chapter 6, he only briefly discusses the different trajectory in the evolution of elections in Taiwan and the Republic of China (ROC) from the 1950s to the end of martial law and the introduction of legal opposition parties in 1987. Of course, other scholars have researched the development of Taiwan’s democratic elections. Yet, Hill’s book provides a historical baseline where the leaders of the PRC and the ROC both started with the same pre-1949 institutional legacy and Chinese cultural heritage, but generated significantly different election procedures and regulations by the 1990s. Although the original *intent* of elections from the 1908 election law continues to influence current PRC leadership and election laws, it changed in Taiwan especially after the 1980s.

Hill provides a clear and well-written historical development of election laws and procedures in China. In the late Qing period, national and local legislative elections were viewed as a way to legitimize and unify a failing and reforming imperial central authority. The nationalist government sought elections as a way to unify the nation after the warlord period. The CCP enacted universal suffrage and used village elections to connect rural residents to the party-state, but also to divide the villagers among eligible voters of the “correct” class from the ineligible “wrong” classes. After the Cultural Revolution and the end of the commune system, the CCP and National People’s Congress, under the leadership of Peng Zhen, added new election laws to the constitution and used village elections again to unify and connect villagers with the party-state. Indeed, the CCP uses elections at the national and subnational levels to legitimize the regime. As Hill aptly points out that “paradoxically, elections contributed to the growth of this authoritarian system” (p. 224). This connects *Voting as a Rite* with the literature on authoritarian resilience and the importance of historical context when examining elections and political development. This book is a must read for anyone interested in the development of Chinese elections and the history of elections in general.

John James Kennedy

John James Kennedy is a professor of political science at the University of Kansas, specializing in local governance and China.



Eugenia Lean. *Vernacular Industrialism in China: Local Innovation and Translated Technologies in the Making of a Cosmetics Empire, 1900–1940*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020. xi, 396 pp. Hardcover \$65.00, ISBN 978-0-231-19348-1.

The history of science and technology has long been told as a tale of Euro-American ingenuity unlocking the secrets of nature. It was the English biochemist Joseph Needham who would break the ignorance of the Western scholarly world on this front, while also revealing an ever-expanding number of discoveries and scientific developments that happened first in China. Eugenia Lean has now further advanced our understanding of technological advancement by focusing on the work of a figure who in the early twentieth century innovated, invented, and grew rich while also sharing many of his ideas in do-it-yourself literature. Rather than seeing the early twentieth century as a transitional phase between tradition and modernity, Lean sees important trends that have continued from the Republican period to the present day where local mastery and adaptation of various global technologies and processes of industry have often been dismissed by Western scholars as either imperfect technology transfer or cheap knockoffs.

Vernacular Industrialism in China uses the case study of an early twentieth-century small industrialist, writer, and editor, Chen Diexian (1879–1940), to argue that an “unapologetic” biographical approach to a single inventor and “tinkerer” in early twentieth-century China is warranted to tell us something about industrial modernity. Chen Diexian, better known as an author of “Mandarin Duck and Butterfly” escapist literature, was an inventor of consumer products as varied as chemical fire extinguishers, toothpowders, face powders, and pharmaceuticals who nurtured a do-it-yourself movement through his publications while also becoming wealthy from the sales of his publications and products.

© 2021 by University

of Hawai'i Press

Eugenia Lean coins the term vernacular industrialism to describe the activities of Chen as a loose translation of *xiao gongyi*, a term which is sometimes translated as “craftsmanship” or “technical arts,” although Lean argues current