

The Vote against Democracy. State construction and politicisation process in post-Mao rural China

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Thesis abstract
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Abstract

This thesis aims to formulate a hypothesis in order to resolve one of the most intriguing enigmas of contemporary China: the implementation of village elections within a regime which remains deeply authoritarian. It will demonstrate that village elections are, contrary to popular belief, not an element in a process of grassroots democracy but an attempt to reinforce the State. It is based particularly on the works of historical sociology which make a distinction between the State as both a political regime and a political centre. While the first supposition refers to how power is exercised, the second one encapsulates the bureaucracy's capacity to take action. If the Chinese State is authoritarian, its political centre is abundantly weak particularly in local and central relations, which has an effect not only on the policy-making process, but also on the objectives being pursued. Thus, far from being a process of democratisation, village elections are an attempt to found the construction of the State into the territory. Processes at work suggest that elections (by empowering the population with the right to select state officials) not only offer a better way to control local powers – the central power often playing the role of a neutral arbitrator – but also a better implementation of policies, the effect of which is to boost the legitimacy of the political authorities. Moreover, the Party is able to seize this electoral legitimacy by co-opting the winners of the elections, the tactics of which I call opportunist aggregation. Finally, village elections are confined to an infra-political dimension giving the Party undisputable power. These tactics have proven to be effective since they make more steady local management possible and the Party perpetual. This premise allows us to understand the reasons for which the Chinese authoritarian regime introduced the electoral instrument into its political system, and also helps us to understand the singular relation between State and Society; *in fine*, this hypothesis provides a means to elucidate the Party's longevity. By endeavouring to expose the complexity of the stakeholders' involvement, the here suggested sociology of the State enables us to understand the logic of a wide array of public policies and their implementation process.