

Voting as a Rite: A History of Elections in Modern China. By Joshua Hill. Harvard East Asian Monographs 417. Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Asia Center, 2019. Pp. xi + 297. \$65.00/£46.95.

In 2006, Yu Keping 俞可平, deputy chief of the Chinese Communist Party's Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, wrote an article entitled "Democracy Is a Good Thing" (*Minzhu shi ge hao dongxi* 民主是個好東西) which sounds as if the CCP was enamoured with democratic institutions and practices. In praising democratic institutions, he qualifies that they must be built on "the national tradition of political culture, the quality of the politicians and the people, and the daily customs of the people" (quoted, p. 221). Linking democratic practices to a cultural and political tradition dating back to the nineteenth century makes clear that democracy in China has been and will always be a Chinese variant based on the needs of the Chinese state. Of course, China's socialist democracy is vastly different from the liberal democracy of the West. It is one with Chinese characteristics, with elections held regularly or irregularly at different levels of government in one form or another without multiparty competition, universal suffrage, and much of a choice. Elections are no novelty in China. During the late Qing and the Republican period, elections had been held under successive governments in the capital and in some provinces. The fact that elections are not alien to modern Chinese political and intellectual thought since the turn of the twentieth century informs Joshua Hill's *Voting as a Rite*.

In the book, Hill has demonstrated that "voting has been a surprisingly common political activity in China" (blurb) since the last years of the Qing dynasty. Building on several earlier works and tapping a wide range of Chinese sources, Hill provides a detailed account of elections in modern China from the perspective of intellectual and cultural history. He adopts a chronological approach, beginning with the import to China, in around the mid-nineteenth century, of the modern notion of election, which Chinese elites understood through the prism of traditional Chinese culture and political thought. Drawing on old Chinese terms, late Qing elites invented neologisms that were nearly compatible with the foreign notion of election. First employed was the term *gongju* 公舉, reappropriated from Qing administrative lexicon, which translates into "public appointment." It denotes a process of "selecting talent for public office" through a consensual, non-competitive system in which the imperial government reserved a decisive role and over which it held veto power. Hailed from the educated elites, the selected were expected to be morally upright, highly competent, and well-prepared to serve the state and the public community. *Gongju* was soon abandoned in favour of *xuanju* 選舉 (select and recommend), which has remained the standard Chinese term for "elections" ever since. For the ruling elites, the purpose of elections was not to establish direct democracy or representative government, but to

select talent for public office to strengthen the state and to facilitate communication between the ruler and the ruled. From the start, voting had more specific meanings and objectives—what Hill calls “foundational expectations”—in modern China than in the West where it is a citizen’s right first and foremost. Those who saw merits in elections expended time and energy studying overseas experiences, with some high officials, diplomats, writers, journalists, industrialists, and political reformers writing on the subject in a push for elections in their own country. The push gained momentum after the abolition in 1905 of the centuries-old civil service exams, which left a void in the system of selecting talent for public appointment. Now, even the Empress Dowager Cixi 慈禧太后, who had crushed the Hundred Days Reform in 1898, had no objection to instituting a new system via elections.

Hill then proceeds to describe the writing of election laws for voting during the years 1898–1908 in preparation for the first elections to Provincial Assemblies in 1909–1911. These assemblies were consultative in nature, for which the elections were relatively unsupervised and generally free, fair and competitive, even though only a very small percentage of the population was enfranchised. Presumably, the new assemblymen, nearly all of them from the gentry class, were talented, eminently capable, and morally upright. They were anxious to become members of the National Assembly, which was eventually convened in October 1911 shortly before the Wuchang Uprising 武昌起義. What followed was only to be expected: the new Republic established after the demise of the dynasty sought legitimacy through new elections which also turned out to be relatively free and competitive among the newly formed political parties. Yuan Shikai 袁世凱, a previous high Qing official and reformer, presided over the election of 1913, which saw him installed as President of the Republic of China. A semblance of democracy was maintained thereafter. Even as civil wars engulfed the country after Yuan’s death in 1916, successive military regimes pursued what Hill terms “warlord democracy” marked by coercion, fraud, and corruption. In the following decades, with the growth of the Nationalist movement in the south and the eventual unification of the country in 1927, albeit nominally, by the Chiang Kai-shek forces, elections were held at various times. The Nationalists-organized elections were intended as an education for citizenship and political participation in the name of political tutelage rather than as an exercise in citizen’s right. Unlike the earlier elections, they were increasingly controlled and micromanaged. Various changes were made to the election regulations, some significantly such as the extension of the franchise to women. In the meantime, the constitutional movement gave birth to several draft constitutions, and the Nationalist government eventually adopted the Constitution of 1947, which had been ratified by the National Assembly in the previous December. Fresh elections were held in the following year in the final phase of the civil war under the watchful eyes of

the beleaguered Nationalist government for the last time on the mainland. After the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, New China held its first election in 1953, giving the people an opportunity for political participation in the socialist construction under the strict control of the ruling communist party.

In his narrative, Hill is careful not to stand on a high moral ground from which to judge China as many American writers, journalists, and politicians are prone to do. In fact, he is not in the business of faulting the Chinese over their authoritarian political system and lack of democratic institutions comparable to those in the liberal West. Nor is he interested in arguing whether Chinese elections have been a success or a failure. Instead, he sets himself the task of describing elections as a recent development in modern China and, in the process, seeks the answer to a previously unasked question: how did the voters define success or failure for themselves? To answer this question, Hill probes their thoughts as well as their actual experiences and what elections meant for them and for the government. What he found is interesting: the voters, elites and ordinary folks alike, had mixed feelings about a whole range of things—from franchise to disfranchise, to voter registration, to voting qualifications, to campaigning, to women's suffrage, to open or secret ballot, to vote buying, fraud, bribery and chicanery, and not least of all to the outcomes of each election—while successive governments viewed the elections as largely fulfilling their stated purposes with outcomes that were always predetermined. News media outlets in Shanghai and elsewhere reported on the elections with a mix of comments, some complimentary and others critical. Seeking truth from facts, as the Chinese would say, Hill provides valuable insights into these elections and feedbacks based on his own research rather than on preconceived ideas or from an ideological perspective. Where he faults the Chinese, he is fair: for example, his criticism of Mao Zedong for not wanting democracy for his people and for seeing elections simply as a ritual.

Hill argues that throughout the twentieth century, elections with Chinese characteristics represented a “quest to domesticate a foreign political process” (p. 221). That is another way of saying Sinification. Elections acquired a distinctive Chinese flavour from the start as the Chinese drew on their country's own traditions of political and institutional thought. Here, we can see a sharp contrast with the West. In a Western democracy, competitive party politics could be so fierce and brutal that elections and the campaigns for them could lead to social and political divisions, polarizing society and causing political instability. In modern China, elections ideally fulfilled the state's “foundational expectations,” namely, popular political participation as an education or enlightenment, a harmonious society in which the ruler and the ruled were linked, and selection of talent for public appointment, all in the service of state-building. Elections, then, were linked to the national crisis brought about by a century of foreign imperialism on the one hand and to the project of China's modern

transformation on the other. In contemporary China, elections follow the same tradition in terms of building a strong and wealthy state under CCP rule. That is all very Chinese.

Treating elections as a rite as the author does raises a question as to whether governments simply felt obliged to hold them perfunctorily rather than take them seriously. From what we can see, the latter appears to be usually, if not always, the case, with governments going to great lengths to ensure the desired outcomes. The voters may have complained about the elections being unfair, too competitive or uncompetitive, or without a choice, and while not everyone knew exactly what they were voting for and whether voting would make a difference, most had some expectations, just as governments had theirs.

While not concerned whether the elections have been a success or a failure, Hill does acknowledge the “undeniable” link between elections and democracy in that they were an experiment in democracy as well as a citizenship education for the enfranchised. The question that must arise is: to what extent have Chinese elections led to democratization, despite over a century of experimenting with them. Hill answers in the negative.

Why is that? Based on the existing literature, Hill suggests four ways of thinking about it. One is to declare that Chinese elections have all been faked with no real meaning at all, thanks to fraud, rigging, manipulation, and predetermined outcomes. Hill thinks that many of them were like that, most notably the 1918 election manipulated by the militarist Anfu Club (Anfu julebu 安福俱樂部), but not all of them. Another way is to argue that changes in the realms of culture and personal attitudes beginning in the early twentieth century failed to connect with electoral politics. Instead of aiding political modernization, early voting experiences ironically served to promote anti-democratic trends in the ensuing decades. A third theory is to blame it on the nature of Chinese political culture, which holds that the Chinese are simply authoritarian by nature, behaving undemocratically because that is their “national character.” Hill does not subscribe to this theory entirely, pointing out that Chinese culture is neither static nor ahistorical and that the political modernization of Taiwan in recent times has demonstrated that Chinese culture per se is no obstacle to democratization. The last theory is that Chinese elections represent a transition to democracy which might take generations to arrive in the mainland. A foundation for democracy will ultimately be created, with optimists thinking that Taiwan could be a model for the mainland. Hill, however, appreciates that the Taiwanese experience is significantly different from that on the mainland in many respects, owing not only to fifty years of Japanese colonial rule but also to the enduring antagonisms against the Nationalists and other émigré mainlanders since 1945.

Finally, Hill draws attention to the tension between election as a form of democracy and election as a means of identifying and selecting talent for public office. As is generally known, the purpose of elections in a Western democracy is to elect a new government that may or may not turn out to be good, let alone talented. The popular vote is important as the people freely exercise their political right. Yet anyone who is less than talented could be elected if only they have the numbers and the financial backing of vested interests. Western elections could be fraught with corruption, too, and the desired outcomes are not always guaranteed. Not surprisingly, contemporary Western governments are often unstable, with leaders holding short tenures of office before being ousted through a revolving door of party politics, as witnessed in Australia, the UK, and some other European states in recent years. In China, where political rights are limited, elections remain a means to select talent to serve the CCP, the state, and the public community. The question hovering over my mind is: how effective are they? A clear answer does not emerge from Hill's book. Nor is it clear what, in his opinion, democracy ultimately means for the CCP and Xi Jinping, now president for life. Notably, the word democracy is not taboo on the mainland. Any traveller to China will hardly fail to see banners and placards in public places inscribed with the word *minzhu* 民主 (democracy) alongside *pingdeng* 平等 (equality), *fazhi* 法治 (rule of law), and *gongyi* 公義 (justice), which suggests that at least lip service is paid to these universal values or that Chinese leaders have their own conceptions of them. Unlike Mao Zedong, Xi Jinping does not find democracy per se repugnant and speaks about it occasionally. We are reminded of Yu Keping's statement that democracy is good for China. Then again, it is socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics, while the search for talent goes on.

A last question one might ask is that if elections prove to be ineffective in selecting talent for public office, what is the alternative? We do not know. But we can be sure that the experiment with elections will continue under the supervision of the CCP, because they remain an instrument for state-strengthening. Xi Jinping has stated that Chinese democracy is not going to be a parliamentary system, a multiparty system, a presidential system, or least of all a constitutional monarchy, all of which had been tried before. Whatever it is going to be, Hill is correct in saying that "[e]lections do have a place in China, as long as they are elections with Chinese characteristics" (p. 221). In the meantime, the tension he describes persists.

Looking to the future, Hill thinks that there can be a new framework of "foundational expectations" within which elections on the mainland are justified in a different way that "will open, rather than foreclose, paths to democratization" (p. 228). He says *will*, not *might*, which suggests that something new can be reinvented in the spirit of the late Qing and early Republican thinkers to meet the needs of a changed situation emerging from China's rise as a great power. It is Western paths that he has

in mind, of course. And if he means liberal democracy, many Chinese would question whether it is necessarily the best for China in view of its huge population, its vast territory, and its complexities, and the need for national unity and social stability at all times.

Voting as a Rite has many strengths as seen from the above. The only quibble I have is its lack of a discourse on the pro-democracy movement during the Republican period. The omission is understandable as it seems irrelevant to Hill's narrative. But it is a tad glaring as one wonders what the elections tell us about the kind of democracy the intellectual and political elites desired. There was no consensus among them, with some (like Hu Shi 胡適) favouring Anglo-American-style democracy, others (like Carsun Chang 張君勱) advocating European-style social democracy and state socialism, and still others (like Chen Jiongming 陳炯明) championing provincial autonomy or (like Liang Shuming 梁漱溟) rural reconstruction, not to mention a bunch of Marxists wanting a socialist political system. How did the elections relate to such political aspirations? Hill could have gone beyond his narrative to reflect on the struggle for democracy in the pre-Communist period.

This quibble aside, *Voting as a Rite* is a well-crafted narrative, highly original and important. It will remain the authoritative work for a long time to come.

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Bronze and Stone: The Cult of Antiquity in Song Dynasty China. By Yunchiahn C. Sena. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2019. Pp. xiii + 220. \$60.00.

The idea that Song-dynasty scholars initiated a new a set of approaches to understanding the Chinese past is almost taken for granted in modern scholarship—and has been for centuries, especially in the studies of ancient bronze vessels and stone inscriptions (*jinshixue* 金石學). Yet it is far from easy to explain why such developments happen—let alone why they happen when, where, and how they do. In *Bronze and Stone: The Cult of Antiquity in Song Dynasty China*, Yunchiahn Sena takes on the challenge of explaining the spread of a vision of antiquity that has informed taste, imagination, and knowledge-making into the present. To give a simple example, many terms used for the forms and motifs of ancient Chinese bronze vessels by contemporary archaeologists were fixed by Song-dynasty scholars, who tried to match what they saw in unearthed objects with words they read in early texts.