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Rural Migrants: On the Fringe of the City, a Bridge to the Countryside

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- 1 **Thomas Heberer and Gunter Schubert (eds.), *Regime Legitimacy in Contemporary China: Institutional Change and Stability*, London, Routledge, 2009, 308 pp.**

This is a timely collection of mostly solidly-researched papers addressing a number of significant questions in understanding contemporary China. Readers may expect too much, however, if they read the book because it is about “legitimacy” and authored by scholars who are Max Weber’s countrymen. The volume under review has difficulties meeting the high standards of Weberian scholarship, but the editors fulfil their promise of providing “sound analyses and in-depth case studies of a wide range of political, social and economic reforms in contemporary China” (p. 2). Perhaps because of the breadth of its range, from rural-tax-for-fees reform to the media market in transition, the editors have not had an easy task focusing the 12 individual chapters on a central theme. They have chosen “legitimacy” as this theme, but considerable attention is paid to the connections between institutional change and political stability. What is the conceptual relationship between those connections and regime legitimacy? The editors seem to follow the line of research opened by Samuel Huntington in *Political Order in Changing Societies*, which emphasises order and stability in the process of modernisation, more than Max Weber’s conceptualisation of legitimacy, which explores how rulers gain acceptance by the ruled. In this sense, the title of the book is somehow misleading.

Efforts are made, of course, to connect institutional change and stability with legitimacy, particularly in empirical analyses of politics. These analyses take up one-third of the volume, as the entire book is evenly divided into three parts: politics, political economy, and society, with each part containing four chapters. A

contradiction between the different understandings of “stability” that the volume employs does not strengthen the conceptual coherence: the Introduction cites the concept of stability contributed by German political scientist Wolfgang Merkel, listing five very useful indicators, but, as in the paragraph that immediately follows, the application of “stability” in the Chinese context often slips from this notion to something closer to the Chinese party-state's understanding of “stability,” which emphasises the sustainability of one-party rule.

The quality of individual chapters varies, but most are well-researched and well-written. Part I, which deals with “politics,” starts with a discussion of ideological change, and the author, Holbig, places her major focus on Jiang Zemin's “Three Representations.” That is followed by Gobel's well-researched chapter on China's rural tax-for-fee reforms based on fieldwork in Anhui Province. Schubert, one of the co-editors, tries to synthesise studies on China's village elections, but his argument that village elections replace “complain villages” with “trust villages” lacks empirical support. The chapter by another editor, Heberer, deals with a parallel subject in urban China, namely the election of residential committees, and his approach is more careful and cautious than his co-editor's. Taken together, they provide insufficient evidence to bolster the assumption that the Chinese Communist Party has successfully avoided a “legitimacy crisis” based on the fourth of Merkel's five indicators of stability, which is “political participation of the population.”

Merkel's fifth indicator is “a fair distribution of GNP by state intervention.” This is apparently a question of political economy, and perfectly applicable to analyses of the Chinese case. Part of the volume is dedicated to “political economy,” and all four of its chapters explore significant issues. But they seldom touch on either the issue of stability and legitimacy or on Merkel's fifth indicator. Through the single example of Zhejiang Province's Hengdian Enterprise Group, Taube examines institutional change of township-village enterprises in terms of property rights. The next chapter, authored by Herrmann-Pillath, tries to deal with a number of cases, its scope rather broad for an article. The subject of the following chapter is China's capital market, which author Schlichting analyses from two sides: those of the market players and the regulators. The reader then comes to one of the best chapters in the collection, in which Fischer highlights how “marketised” financial incentives are harnessed by the political authorities to reinforce media self-censorship.

The section on “society” begins with an examination by Darimont of China's social security system. Hebel and Schucher then explore the emergence of a “socialist” market labour regime in China. Gransnow's paper looks at the role of NGOs in China's anti-poverty campaigns, while the last chapter, contributed by Oberheitmann, deals with China's environmental policy, telling us that, regrettably, environmental policy is still a minor consideration, even though China is increasingly challenged by environmental issues both domestically and globally. The author attributes this mainly to China's priority on economic policies. Indeed, in the view of this reviewer, a political economic approach, as taken by the authors of Part II, would be much more powerful in explaining the nature and character of China's environmental situation.

The collection justifiably applies the term “institutional heterogeneity” to characterise transitional China, and this quality increases the challenges faced by China scholars in grasping the essence of the transition. As in the Chinese folk tale, some may highlight the gold side and others the silver side. This collection is no exception,

including two types of papers oriented through different research strategies: some emphasise officially announced changes and construct optimistic predictions on that basis; others look at institutional operations and policy implementation. Both sides are important for understanding China, but in this reviewer's humble opinion, the latter type of research is often more solid and convincing. No single collection is broad enough to cover all the important and relevant issues, but I regret that this volume does not touch on topics such as governmental corruption, popular protest, and distribution inequality, all of which have an enormous impact on stability and legitimacy.