of administrations both as part and parcel of America’s soft power and as a
mission to fulfill America’s moral destiny. Finally, on the heels of a powerful
Chongqing police boss and a blind lawyer from Shandong valiantly fleeing in
the early months of 2012 to American diplomatic installations for protection,
one might as well ask anew who and what is to be feared most.

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As China has continued to emerge as an economically formidable player on the world stage, the sustainability of its current one-party political system has come under increasing scrutiny. Kerry Brown’s book, written in 2010, provides an informed outsider’s commentary on the puzzles and paradoxes associated with the Chinese Communist Party attempt to develop democracy within the Party. A senior fellow at the Royal Institute of International Affairs, and author of several works on Chinese politics and policy, Brown is well placed to examine the question of whether China is working towards a new, Chinese, form of democracy—a question already well recognized as crucial by Chinese academics and political commentators themselves.

At the seventeenth national congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2007, Hu Jintao was not only confirmed for a further five years as party general secretary (hence re-elected as president at the National People’s Congress the following year), but also gave a speech emphasizing the central role in leadership and modernization that the CPC was determined to play. This was to involve radical reform of all areas of administration aiming at changes that would support social stability while still deepening and extending the rule of law, promoting justice and making government more accountable to the people. While Hu’s speech was strong in its rhetoric but weak in details, three academics from the Central Party School in Beijing followed up the speech by publishing *Storming the Fortress*, a work that gave more detail on Hu’s reform agenda, and aimed to give substance to his comment that “without democracy there is no socialism.” *Storming* sets out a program for increasing democracy within the CPC through reforms to the people’s congresses, the systems of government and consultation, and the legal system. It also recommends greater separation between the CPC and the state along with the close regulation of civil society organizations and religious groups, to ensure that such groups work to improve, not subvert, government policies.

*Storming the Fortress* is very much the focus of Brown’s book, and is subject to detailed description and analysis in the long final fifth chapter. As a way into this, the author chooses the topic of elections, looking at the
CPC experiment in village democracy started in 1988, an experiment that some had hoped might provide a model for wider democratic reforms within the Party. As the historical first chapter of the book shows, elections and calls for democracy are not alien things in the twentieth-century history of China. The 1913 election, which brought Sun Yat Sen’s KMT to power, was followed by voter registration and elections in several provinces, and village elections were widely introduced in the 1920s. Mao’s reintroduction of village elections in 1988 was not therefore some new and unprecedented step into the realms of democracy.

In the second chapter, Brown shows that the idea that democracy is a good thing has not been alien to the ideology of the CPC itself, so long as any attempts at it are confined to “democracy within,” a kind of reform that does not challenge the Party’s role as leader, guide and stability-ensuring structure for the country as a whole. The problem for the CPC is how to shift a monolithic party apparatus into responding more flexibly to the impact of trade reforms, the country’s global economic importance, increases in personal wealth and general standards of living while at the same time the law courts are just as answerable to the CPC as is the military. With no separation of powers, how to ensure that legal agreements are properly binding and cannot be overturned at the whim of the cadres (Party officials). Likewise, how can a monolithic system encourage openness, proper scrutiny and accountability of budgets, not to mention citizen participation?

Democracy within might seem to be the answer to these questions, and the attempt to introduce a level of democracy to the lowest administrative division of the country—the 800,000 or so villages—seemed to provide a risk-free experiment. Villages, after all, play only an informal role in administration, have no significant budgets or statutory powers, and so the stakes in the experiment are not high. The third chapter shows that elections have often favoured Party stalwarts, so that the elected village heads are sometimes the Party heads as well. Where non-Party candidates, or candidates not favoured by local officials, have stood, they can be ruled out by Party bosses or even imprisoned on trumped-up charges. Where independent candidates have succeeded, they have not always had happy relations with Party officials, either at village or higher levels. In the fascinating fourth chapter, Brown lets the voices of Chinese people themselves reflect on what is to be learned from the whole experiment with village democracy and what it means for the project of expanding democracy within the CPC. These are brief, anonymous interviews he conducted with a cross-section of people: a political scientist, a retired Party official, two professors (disciplines unstated), a popular writer and a security official. Their well-reasoned yet divergent views give, so the author tells us, a picture of the uncertainty and diversity that currently characterize much of the debate on democracy within.

Naturally, there is much more to be said about democracy and related concepts such as power, freedom, participation and accountability than is
given in this short book, which provides useful background for any more
detailed discussion. As corruption, lawlessness and violence emerge as
significant themes in the social fabric of contemporary China, the CPC
faces problems that are also a challenge to liberal democracies. Brown’s
discussion of the mixed results of the democracy experiment gives insight
into how problematic China’s present development pathway is and into the
perplexities its leaders face in confronting the challenges that lie ahead.

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SMOKELESS SUGAR: The Death of a Provincial Bureaucrat and the
Construction of China’s National Economy. Contemporary Chinese Studies
(Tables, figures.) C$32.95, paper. ISBN 978-0-7748-1653-3.

Emily Hill’s book is a fascinating biography of Feng Rui, an agricultural
economist at the Guangdong provincial Bureau of Agriculture and
Forestry who was executed by the Guomindang in 1936 for corruption and
“oppression of the rural masses.” The book uses Feng’s life story as a device
for investigating a series of different issues, among them the reconstruction
of the Chinese central state under the Guomindang, attempts to create
a national economy through overcoming regionalism, and the roots of
PRC-era national economic planning in the regional economic planning
of the Republic. It does a lovely job of untangling the very complex politics
of Guangdong during the early-to-mid-1930s, based on an impressive and
meticulous survey of archival sources, personal letters, interviews and open-
source materials.

The book is structured more or less chronologically, following Feng’s
life from his youth in Guangdong through his schooling in Nanjing and,
most significantly, his doctoral training in agricultural economics at Cornell
University. There he embraced the tenets of scientific agriculture, and
developed a life-long conviction that China’s agriculture-based society needed
to be reorganized into marketing and credit cooperatives and to receive
influxes of capital, not revolution, in order to prosper. He further developed
and spelled out these arguments while participating in James Yen’s famous
Mass Education Movement in Ding County, Hebei. Subsequently, he returned
to Guangdong in 1931, joining the separatist general Chen Jitang’s regime to
take up the director’s post in the Bureau of Agriculture and Forestry. There
he paid particular attention to linking agriculture and industry in the sugar
sector, hoping to create a vertically integrated modern sugar manufacturing
industry that would bring prosperity to the countryside and help develop
a modern industrial base. He also promoted regional trade protectionism
to defend Guangdong’s agriculture against imports, both foreign and