Accountability without Democracy

This book examines the fundamental issue of how citizens get government officials to provide them with the roads, schools, and other public services they need by studying communities in rural China. In authoritarian and transitional systems, formal institutions for holding government officials accountable are often weak. The state often lacks sufficient resources to monitor its officials closely, and citizens are limited in their power to elect officials they believe will perform well and to remove them when they do not. Not surprisingly, governmental public goods provision in these places is often poor. Half of the villages in China, for example, lack paved roads and running water.

The answer, Lily L. Tsai finds, lies in a community’s social institutions. Even when formal democratic and bureaucratic institutions of accountability are weak, government officials can still be subject to informal rules and norms created by community solidary groups that have earned high moral standing in the community. These solidary groups establish and enforce public obligations that everyone in the community – officials as well as citizens – is expected to follow. This argument builds on existing theories of social networks and social capital, but in contrast to many existing social capital arguments that emphasize trust and cooperation, the book focuses on the importance of moral authority and the moral obligations that these social networks generate.

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Accountability without Democracy

SOLIDARY GROUPS AND 
PUBLIC GOODS PROVISION 
IN RURAL CHINA

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For my parents, Huei Chu Tsai and Cheng Kween Lee
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