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In Search of Deliberative Democracy in China

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Abstract

In democratic countries, deliberative democracy is proposed to rectify problems of liberal democracy. This paper explores deliberative democracy in China, conventionally regarded as an authoritarian country. After examining some deliberative practices and institutions in China and its more democratic public sphere, a conclusion is drawn that despite problems such as flawed institutional design and state domination, an immature deliberative democracy exists in China. The prospect of deliberative democracy in China is optimistically predicted, based on the public's strong democratic consciousness, the government's interest in democratic reform and the relatively moderate practices of deliberative democracy.

Keywords

Deliberative Democracy, China, Spillover Effect

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Deliberative democracy institutionalizes methods for rational decision making with the involvement of citizens. It emerged as an attempt to improve current liberal democracies in western countries. However, recently, several deliberative-like practices have been witnessed in China, a country which is conventionally regarded as authoritarian and lacking in democracy. To explore whether deliberative democracy already exists or is able to survive in China, this paper examines political practices, institutions and the public sphere in China within the framework of Hendriks's classification of micro and macro deliberative democracy.

This paper starts with a theoretical clarification of deliberative democracy, with a consideration of the Chinese reality. Part Two gives a brief introduction to the political context in China and tries to explain motivations for the government's attempts at democracy. Part Three analyzes deliberative events in China, which belong to the micro version of deliberative democracy. A case at national level and several examples at local level are presented. Part Four examines the Chinese public sphere through the media, the people and civil society, in the sense of macro deliberative democracy. An evaluation of the status quo and the prospect of deliberative democracy in China is conducted as a conclusion.

Part One: Concept Clarification

In democratic countries, deliberative democracy is proposed as a rectification of current forms of democracy, especially liberal democracy. It is also understood through a focus on the deliberative aspect, emphasizing the differences it offers to current democracies (Dryzek 2006, Parkinson 2004). When the concept is applied to China where the political background is entirely different, it is more useful to consider both constituent parts of deliberative democracy: deliberation and democracy.

1.1 Deliberation

Irrationality is said to be one serious problem of liberal democracy (Parkinson 2006, p.1). Political scientists criticize the simplicity of preferences aggregation and also argue that bargaining makes an election more like "vote trading"(Elster 1998, Dryzek 2006, Rosenberg 2006, p. 78, Gutmann and Thompson 1996). Electoral strategies help politicians manipulate the general public. In pursuit of improvement, deliberation is presented as one solution.

Deliberation originates from researchers' theoretical designs and experiments, which, with constant development, are subsequently imported into political practices (Fischer 1993, Hendriks 2005). For example, the 3-step procedure of policy making on complex issues (Renn *et al.* 1993) has evolved into citizens' panels, one common deliberative technique. The legitimating function of

deliberation further promotes its increasingly extensive application (Dryzek and Torgerson 1993, Hendriks 2005, Parkinson 2004).

Currently, deliberation has developed into various forms like citizens' juries, deliberative polls, consensus conferences and participatory budgeting. The general procedures of deliberation include systematically informing citizens, participant debates and the reaching of decision for final recommendations (Hendriks 2005, Parkinson 2004). Embedded in these procedures are key principles for successful deliberation. One is reasoning between participants, which guards rationality against interests bargaining (Dryzek and Torgerson 1993, Hendriks 2005, Parkinson 2004.); another is equality, which guarantees public discussion and reasoning (Fishkin et al. 2010, Parkinson 2004). Inclusion is also important in deliberation, as it breaks politicians' monopoly over policy making (Hendriks 2005, Leib 2005)

1.2 Democracy

Democracy can be regarded as the foundation holding up deliberative democracy. Without democracy, deliberation can only be an innovation for government management or policy making (He 2006a), or at worst a democratic decoration of authoritarianism. To be more specific, deliberation itself cannot decide or change the nature of the political system. Though democracy itself is a contested concept, most westerners adopt the benchmark of the institutionalized inclusive franchise and regular competitive elections for judgment (Heywood 2002, p. 72, Huntington 1992).

The current political situation in China has a one-party system and unelected leaders at the top (He and Leib 2006). If the western standards of plurality and voting are insisted upon when considering democratization, then deliberative democracy in China cannot be considered. Therefore, democracy in this paper is understood in its broadest sense.

The word democracy dates back to the ancient Greek and its original meaning at that time is "rule by the people" (Heywood 2002, p. 68). The concept of "rule by the people" can be found in both direct democracy and representative democracy in modern society. Whether the form of democracy is direct public participation in decision making in a direct democracy or the delegation of power to selected representatives in representative democracy, the fundamental idea is that the general public enjoy ultimate power in public issues, such that their interests are served. From the perspective of government, democracy can be explained as "some sort of 'systematic responsiveness' of government policies to popular wishes" (Goodin 1993). This paper, therefore, will examine democracy through the people's influence on the government and their power of persuasion about public issues.

1.3 Deliberative Democracy in Practice

A complete process of deliberative democracy should go through deliberative procedures, although not necessarily confined to contained forums, consensus seeking, political influence on government, and the production of a corresponding outcome.

Hendriks categorizes deliberative democracy in the real world into two streams: the micro and macro. According to Hendriks, deliberative democracy at the micro level includes various contained deliberative forums such as citizens' juries, consensus conferences and deliberative polls (Hendriks 2002), which are embedded in existing political institutions. Political influence of these forums should be guaranteed, for example, throughout policy processes.

Deliberative democracy at the macro level extends to "...the larger flow of communication in the public sphere" including ordinary citizens, civil society and the media (Dryzek 2006), ranging from public debates in the media to private discussions between friends in daily life (Parkinson 2004). The extensive communication brings the general public, politicians and policy experts into the big tent to rationally exchange ideas

Micro and macro deliberative democracies are never absolutely separate from each other. Instead, in practice, the two influence, promote and can even convert into each other, as has been confirmed in subsequent empirical studies. Classifying rather than defining makes Hendriks's framework applicable to the context of China. Thus, this paper will employ this framework to direct a comprehensive search for deliberative democracy in China.

Part Two: Political Background in China

Unlike the setting of liberal democracy in western countries, China has a very special political background for the development of deliberative democracy. China can be defined as an authoritarian country, because its top leaders are not elected, because it is a one-party dominated country, and because even its People's Congress has evolved into an elite club which excludes disadvantaged groups such as the unemployed, the poor, and migrant workers (Guo 2009, He and Leib 2006). The government is the dominant player in Chinese politics historically and currently.

But it is very interesting to discover that the Chinese government, compared to other authoritarian countries, is less rigid and more enlightened, as it has expressed sustainable interest in political reform, especially democratic innovations (He 2004), and has undertaken some actions towards this. For instance, the life tenure of leaders was abolished in the 1980s, inner-party democracy aiming for collective decisions involving all members on inner-party affairs was introduced after the Thirteenth National People's Congress of the Communist Party in 1987, and village elections were implemented nationally in

late the 1990s (Fu 2010). The incumbent Premier Wen talked about "the construction of democracy and legal system" in Government Work Reports from the year between 2004 and 2009¹.

Moreover, interactions between the government and the people have increased in the form of on-line dialogues between leaders and citizens. For example, many representatives of the National People's Congress open blogs on the internet, to better connect with and represent the people. In June 2008, President Hu communicated on-line with netizens through People's net (www.people.com.cn). Early this year, Premier Wen also talked with the general public through the internet².

The Chinese government's interest in democratic innovations can be explained from two perspectives. The Communist Party in China came into being with the requirement of representing people, which can be read in the Party Constitution. The requirement was later written into the Constitution after the establishment of the People's Republic of China³. The design of the People's Congress and official claims such as "the people are the masters of their country" all embody characteristics of populism. The government's current democratic exploration responds to this founding requirement to enhance representation of the people.

More recently, the changing external environment has led to acceleration in the government's pace of reform. With the rapid development of the economy and the advent of social pluralism, conflicts between different interest groups and citizens' dissatisfactions with the government have emerged. These have been more frequently manifested in extreme forms such as collective public security incidents⁴ particularly since the 1990s (Chung 2004), which have undermined social stability and the legitimacy of the government. Confronted with growing social pressure, the Chinese government has realized that the conventional top-down management approach is no longer workable (Rosenberg 2006). In order to avoid social or even political upheavals (He 2006b), the government has therefore responded with extensive democratic innovations, deliberation among them.

Part Three: The Emergence of Deliberative Democracy at Micro Level

¹ Government Work Reports from 1954 to 2010 are available from: http://www.gov.cn/test/2006-02/16/content_200719.htm [Accessed 1 October 2011]

² The news coverage is available from: http://www.china.com.cn/international/txt/2008-06/23/content_15871578.htm [Accessed 6 March 2011]

³ Full texts of the Party Constitution and the Constitution respectively are available from: http://news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/2002-11/18/content_633225.htm and http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2004/content_62714.htm [Accessed 27 March 2012]

⁴ Public security incidents, 群体性治安事件 in Chinese, refer to violent events organized by certain groups or individuals to pressure for their interests

3.1 Deliberation at the national level

An important deliberative reform at the national level has been the introduction of a public hearing system, originating in the Administrative Punishment Law in 1996. In 1998, the procedure of public hearing was also written into the Price Law, stipulating that a public hearing should be held before price setting of public goods. The Law on Legislature, passed in 2000, also requires a public hearing to be an integral part of making administrative laws and regulations (Wang 2007, p. 212-223). The public hearing system, encouraging the general public to express their opinions, has been widely used on various issues, like educational charges, restrictions on fireworks, and price adjustment of civil airplane tickets. By the end of 2005, more than 2,000 public hearing conferences had been held all over China (Gong, 2006).

Case study: Adjustment of the personal income-tax threshold (2005)

The adoption of public hearing to the adjustment of the personal income-tax threshold is of great significance. This is not only because the issue of personal income tax holds great importance for the general public, but also because this public hearing is one of the few carried out on a national scale. Prior to this adjustment, people who earned 800 yuan or less a month were exempt from the personal income-tax payment⁵. In July 2003, two researchers from the Research Institute for Fiscal Science, Ministry of Finance, published an article entitled "China's income distribution and taxation policies"⁶ which suggested raising the threshold of personal income tax. Closely following that suggestion, in late October that year, the Ministry of Commerce presented several proposals which also suggested raising the threshold. Subsequently, the issue of whether the central government should raise the threshold drew enormous attention from people from all walks of life. Scholars published articles on the topic; media made special programs about the issue; ordinary people discussed it on the internet. After approximately a year of public debate, media and internet polls showed that the majority of citizens advocated lifting the personal income-tax threshold to 1,500 yuan or even higher⁷.

National discussions prompted the central government to put the issue of raising the personal income-tax threshold on the policy-making agenda. In August 2005, after extensive consultation and the corresponding re-drafting by National

⁵ In 2004, the annual disposable income per capita in urban areas was 9,422 yuan and the annual net income per capita in rural areas was 2,936 yuan. Since the part of farmers' incomes from agriculture products was exempt from personal income tax, the threshold adjustment mainly took the income of waged citizens in cities into consideration. The data source is "Chinese National Economy and Social Development Statics Report 2004", available from <http://finance.qq.com/a/20050228/000163.htm> [Accessed 26 March 2012]

⁶ The article title in Chinese is 我国居民收入分配状况及财税调节政策.

⁷ The news coverage is available from: http://news.xinhuanet.com/fortune/2005-09/27/content_3548698.htm [Accessed 8 October 2010]

People's Congress Standing Committee, a draft bill for a new threshold of 1,500 yuan came out, together with detailed explanations for the new bill. Representatives were called for a public hearing in Beijing on September 27, 2005. Any waged citizen over 18 years could apply by post, fax or on line to be a representative (National People's Congress Standing Committee 2005). By the application deadline, around 5,000 people applied to be representatives, 33% of whom agreed on the new threshold of 1,500 yuan while 47% of whom supported an even higher threshold. These percentages were similar to those gained from media and internet surveys.

The information of the attendants at the one-day public hearing meeting is shown in table 1.

Table 1 Attendants at the public hearing

Role	Legislators	Governmental Representatives	Public Representatives (I)	Public Representatives (II)
Number	13	8	20	20
Function	Listener*	Speaker	Speaker	Listener
Selection basis	They were from the committees of National People's Congress.	They were leaders from relevant governmental departments.	They were selected from among the applicants on the basis of demography, income, vocation, age and point of view.	

* Three of the legislators worked as hosts.

The public hearing was broadcast live on TV and the internet⁸. At the beginning of the hearing, 2 governmental representatives from departments drafting the income-tax bill made half hour statements, giving information on the background and the main principles of income-tax deduction, reasons for the setting of the threshold, and replies to major questions raised by the public. Following that, each of the remaining 26 speakers was invited to deliver an eight-minute statement and there was a final section of three-minute additional remarks for each representative. 6 of the 20 public speakers agreed with the threshold of 1,500 yuan, 12 supported a higher threshold from 1,600 yuan to 3,000 yuan and 2 supported a lower threshold. As for the other 6 governmental speakers, most of them agreed on the national threshold of 1,500 yuan. The result of the adjustment of personal income-tax threshold was that the National People's Congress Standing Committee enacted a new threshold of 1,600 yuan.

As the Chinese media and people commented, this public hearing was a

⁸ Online text broadcast is available from:
<http://www.npc.gov.cn/npc/oldarchives/xwzb/lftzh/xwzb/index.jsp.htm> [Accessed 17 August 2011]

good attempt at democracy and displayed several aspects of deliberative democracy. First, speakers from both the government and the public made full use of statistics and examples to support their points of view, which demonstrates well the rationality of deliberation. Second, the organizers made an effort to ensure equality. For example, the careful selection of public representatives avoided the dominance of voices from certain groups. In addition, like the public speakers, the government representatives also used reasoning based on evidence, instead of drawing on their authority, and all participants enjoyed the same amount of talk time. Third, the principle of inclusion was maximally guaranteed by the selection basis of public representatives, which contributed to relatively satisfactory representativeness of the attendants. Lastly, the government's responsiveness was evident in the whole process, from the policy agenda setting to the legislative outcome. It was the macro deliberation carried out in the media that prompted the central government to put the adjustment of the personal income-tax threshold onto the policy-making agenda. The draft bill setting 1,500 yuan as the new threshold was a formal response from the government to the public opinions formed through macro deliberation. As for the final result of 1,600 yuan, it was interpreted by the media as another response from the government, namely to the large number of demands in the public hearing for a higher threshold than 1,500 yuan (Pei 2005).

Nevertheless, problems exist. Despite the organizers' care, the public hearing still lacked some of the key procedures required by deliberative forums. For example, statements delivered consecutively, including the final additional remarks, cannot be counted as debates. A lack of debate, coupled with limited time, made participants' preference transformation almost impossible. This was confirmed by the reality that no representatives expressed changed attitudes toward the threshold setting during the final remarks. Therefore, no consensus was reached, no specific proposal for the adjustment was agreed to by all representatives and the supposed-deliberative public hearing was more like a conference for the acquisition of public opinions. Without any specific recommendation, the government responded to people's expectations through the symbolic addition of another 100 yuan.

Another problem, a latent one in this case, is state domination. The government itself arranged this public hearing, designing it and selecting representatives. But as stated as a positive point, the government did not show off its authority and higher political position in the whole process. The fact that inequality was avoided in this case could be attributed to two factors: transparency and government's rationality. Full coverage, a live broadcast and national attention put this public hearing under the supervision of the general public. Under this white-box situation, to obey the rules of the game was the solitary rational choice for the government; otherwise, it could have suffered a

legislative deadlock.

Considering its good points and shortcomings, this public hearing was a partial success from the perspective of micro deliberative democracy. More importantly, this case showed the government's willingness to practice deliberative democracy and it also demonstrated that with proper design, deliberative democracy at the micro level could be realized in China. For further improvement, efforts should be made on institutional designs for sufficient debating and institutionalized supervision by the general public.

3.2 Deliberation at the local level

In its exploration of political reform and the construction of democracy at the local level, the Chinese government has developed a variety of institutions which exhibit deliberative attributes. He (2006b) summarizes three of the most common ones in China.

(1) Consultative and deliberative meetings: These meetings normally have three-stage procedures. First, organizers, often leaders, announce and explain the agenda as an introduction. After that, participants express their opinions. At the final stage, leaders will answer questions raised by participants. On some occasions, a final decision will be made. These meetings aim at a consensus, rather than using voting as a solution. When a consensus cannot be attained, multiple rounds of deliberation may be used. The aforementioned public hearing is one form taken by consultative and deliberative meetings.

(2) Citizen evaluation meetings: These meetings provide ordinary people with opportunities to evaluate local leaders' performances. The procedures of citizen evaluation meetings enjoy some similarities with deliberative polls. At the beginning of the meetings, major leaders give reports on the performances of local leaders, similar to the systematic information segment in deliberative polls. After that, citizens raise questions for clarification, comment on the report, exchange opinions, and discuss the policies and performance of the evaluated leaders. Lastly, citizens are asked to fill in an evaluation form, which is also called a confidence vote. The results will affect the leaders' bonus and political prospects.

(3) Residential or village representative assemblies: These assemblies are also conducted in deliberative manner. The Village Representative Assembly can make collective decisions on issues like the use of collective land, or the establishment and development of village enterprises. In the city, residents from the same community organize a Residential Representative Assembly to discuss public issues such as security and community environment.

The initial designs of the above institutions do not all come from the idea of deliberation. The Village Representative Assembly, an important part of village self-government, dates back to the 1980s before the concept of deliberation reached China. Thus, it is not strange to find gaps between the procedures used

and the deliberative model. Nevertheless, the virtues of deliberative democracy, such as civil dialogues, citizens' influence on final outcomes and inclusion, are included.

During their development, these institutions have improved in the following aspects: First, deliberative practices, such as public hearing and village self-government, have been institutionalized by being written into laws⁹. This ends their status of experiment and reduces the risk of suspension. Second, their application is expanding. For instance, the adoption of public hearing has been extended from price setting of public goods to administrative law making. Another example is that some local governments such as that from Liaoning Province have, since March 2009, included the government as evaluation objects of citizen evaluation meetings¹⁰, after the proposal of Service-oriented Government by Premier Wen in the Government Work Report of 2005.

The practices of these institutions, however, also reveal problems. The most serious and most common is state domination over deliberative processes. This problem also existed in the previously discussed case of personal income tax, but was overcome in practice due to transparency and the central government's rationality. In local deliberations, transparency is not always fully guaranteed. The lack of transparency consequently gives local governments the possibility of manipulation through selecting representatives who support the government rather than those who represent public opinions. As a result, some public hearings on price setting for public goods have been labeled "price rising meetings". Citizen evaluation meetings, without a legislative guarantee similar to that for public hearings, face more risks of manipulation or suspension¹¹.

Part Four: The Transforming Public Sphere for Deliberative Democracy at the Macro level

As discussed in Part One, macro deliberative democracy refers to the wider public sphere, including all discussions and debates carried out in both formal media and informal private conversations (Habermas 1996). The media, ordinary people and civil society and their influence on government will be examined in this section.

4.1 Media

According to statistics given by China National Radio, radio and TV coverage rates reached 96% and 97% of the population, respectively, in 2008¹². And there

⁹ The revised Organic Law on Village Self-government was enacted in 1998.

¹⁰ The news coverage is available from:

<http://news.163.com/10/0705/10/6AQRFIN6000146BC.html> [Accessed 26 September 2010]

¹¹ For example, the activity of "Beijing Netizens' Evaluation of Government" in 2003 ended abruptly without publishing the result. More information of the activity is available from:

<http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2003-12-06/08591271449s.shtml> [Accessed 6 March 2011]

¹² The statistics are available from:

were 485 million internet users, 36.2% of the total population, by June 2011 (CNNIC, 2011). Extensive coverage by the media paves the way for good channels of information delivery and creates a solid foundation for the cultivation of deliberative democracy.

In addition, the recent commercialization of state media, the growing freedom in journalistic culture, the entry of foreign media, and flourishing internet use have been transforming the conventional state domination of the media in China (Chen 2003, Li 2006). The recent increase in reports delivering criticisms and complaints is a consequence of this transformation (Zhang, 1999). The growing independence of the media enhances the quality of the media as an information provider, a promoter and a supervisor in deliberative democracy.

In the case of the personal income-tax threshold adjustment, the media in China carried each phase of this deliberative practice. The first phase was knowledge dissemination in preparation for subsequent rational discussion. Before the public hearing in 2005, the mainstream media made special programs on this topic, giving arguments for and against the rise. Scholars of economics and other relevant subjects also contributed many articles on the internet, in magazines and academic journals. The second phase of debates was also carried out simultaneously through different forms of media. Popular websites in China, like Sina and Yahoo, opened featured forums for free discussion. When the decision for raising the threshold was presented by the media, following polls, the media-promoted deliberation obtained the government's response: a draft bill proposing a higher threshold and a public hearing. By then, media had promoted the issue on the policy agenda, which can be viewed as a success symbol of macro deliberative democracy. It was also the media that pushed the threshold adjustment onto the track of micro deliberative democracy. The generally satisfactory result of the public hearing was also partly owing to media attention.

4.2 People

Carole Pateman's "spillover thesis" argues that people's attitudes and behaviors are deeply affected by institutions and their participation in workplaces can help them foster democratic habits which can be translated into national political life (Carter, 2003, 2006, Pateman 1970). In China, there are also implications of the spillover effect, although the institutions are not confined to workplaces.

Deliberative institutions in China, like public hearings, residential or village representative assemblies, and their increasingly frequent application have aroused passion for participation in social and political discussions and for democracy. The popularization of on-line forums provides substantial opportunities for people to exercise reasoning and further reinforces their discursive habits. When rights are ignored by the government, the concept of

http://www.cnr.cn/09zt/60zn/szzg/200909/t20090909_505462562.html [Accessed 19 August 2011]

deliberative democracy implanted in people's minds can be converted into action. The case in Shanghai of the Maglev train well demonstrates this.

Case study: Shanghai-Hangzhou Maglev train¹³

In 2006, the Shanghai government planned to build another Maglev line connecting Shanghai and Hangzhou, considered by some to be another "white elephant" for the 2010 Expo. The new line would run through some densely populated communities, posing a hazard for residents' health and possibly causing noise pollution. When the plan was made public at the end of 2007, heated discussions on this controversial project were first carried out on online forums. An overwhelming majority of people strongly criticized the Shanghai government for this plan. The people's statements can be summarized in two major points: first, almost all participants wanted the Shanghai government to open a public hearing on the construction; second, they clearly stated their reasons for objection, including the great harm of Maglev radiation on health and unaffordable economic costs. In early 2008, thousands of people gathered at People's Square in Shanghai. They marched silently to protest against the Maglev project and demanded that the government should sit down and talk with citizens. As a response, the Shanghai government opened several channels for the expression of public opinions and the Maglev extension plan was suspended.

In March 2010, the government revealed the approval on the suspended project. Immediately after that, the project was again questioned by thousands of netizens on its huge economic and environmental costs and limited benefits. To date, there is still no construction schedule for this project¹⁴.

A highlight of this case is the people's demands for a deliberative meeting to solve the problem. This distinguishes it from other protests which are simply aimed at maximizing personal economic interests, such as bargaining for compensations. The people's demands imply the people's recognition of deliberation, which is of great significance for the development of deliberative democracy in China. Meanwhile, discussions on this project with reasons illustrate the people's rationality. When faced with the strong determination of the people, the government, whether willingly or unwillingly, has accepted the consensus to suspend the project conveyed through both the protest and online discussions.

4.3 Civil Society

When its relationship with the government is considered, civil society in China is

¹³ Maglev, short for magnetic levitation, is a public transport system that uses magnetic technology to suspend, guide and propel carriages.

¹⁴ Detailed coverage of the Maglev project is available from: <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/sd/2010-04-01/134119988361.shtml> and <http://money.163.com/10/0322/01/62BFVOMC002526O5.html> [Accessed 22 August 2011]

weak. According to the Regulations on Association Registration, the establishment of a non-governmental organization needs to go through strict procedures for the approval by the Chinese government. In order to maintain their legal status, a high proportion of social organizations in China engage only in government-welcome work, like education, medical care and environmental protection (Wang 2001). Some social organizations are even called “state-sponsored NGOs”. The activities of social organizations are also constrained. For example, “(even) the state-sponsored NGOs needed an invitation letter from the state to get permission to attend (an international conference)” (He 2006a). Their lack of full autonomy poses a big obstacle for social organizations to enter the policy process, much less to be an initiator or promoter of a deliberative process. This also explains why the organizer of the income-tax public hearing in 2005 was the government, instead of a third party from civil society.

As more ordinary people realize their social responsibility and become more aware of democratic potentials, a better and more dynamic environment for civil society has been gradually forming (Wang and Gu 2000). Furthermore, the plurality of media forms and the pluralism of media content expand the space for civil society. With the improvement in the above two aspects, the influence of civil society has begun to show in political life in China. For example, the efforts of some unregistered alliances organized by parents to seek lost children and micro-bloggers’ voluntary participation in online activity against the abduction of children ultimately pushed the State Council to publish Suggestions to Strengthen the Assistance for Homeless Juveniles¹⁵ in August 2011. Though the activities are not necessarily deliberative, they are at least good attempts and initiate the integration of civil society and deliberative democracy in China.

Conclusion: An Evaluation of Deliberative Democracy in China

Nascent Deliberative Democracy

The paper offers empirical observation combined with analysis, in an attempt to present details relevant to various aspects of deliberative democracy. Examples in Part Three and Four show that deliberative democracy in China can be found both at micro and macro levels and is gradually being incorporated into daily decision making by being stipulated in laws. Deliberative procedures like informing and discussion can be found in most Chinese practices. The rationality is shown on participants like people, media and the government. In terms of equality, inclusion democratic properties, though not always satisfactory, they exist to some extent. Furthermore, deliberation has increasingly wide application in public life in China and can exert more influence than before on Chinese politics.

¹⁵ The full text is available from: http://www.gov.cn/zwggk/2011-08/18/content_1927798.htm
[Accessed 25 August 2011]

Nevertheless, there are some areas needing improvement for a better and more mature deliberative democracy in China. In terms of institutional design at the micro level, more effort should be spent on ensuring sufficient time especially for the segments of informing and debating, even at the costs of efficiency. Otherwise, the effect of deliberation will be discounted, for preference transformation occurs with extreme reluctance, as was shown in the public hearing of the adjustment of the personal income-tax threshold.

Another problem existing in both macro and micro versions of deliberative democracy in China is the deep-rooted state domination. This can undermine people's motivation for deliberation and may even reduce deliberation to being merely a tool for legitimacy and social stability used by the government. This problem also exists in western democratic countries like the UK (Harrison and Mort 1998) and is impossible to eradicate in the short term in China. However, it can be alleviated and even overcome in practices of deliberative democracy through media attention and the collective strength of the people. In the personal income tax case, media attention throughout the whole process left almost no space for the government to move against the deliberative recommendation to raise the threshold. The case of Shanghai-Hangzhou Maglev also demonstrates that the tremendous power of people can balance that of the government. The growing independence of the media along with people's democratic awareness will further alleviate the problem of state domination in Chinese deliberative democracy.

The Prospects

As for the prospect of deliberative democracy in China, the people and the government are the two decisive players. As the case of Shanghai-Hangzhou Maglev demonstrates, deliberative practices have not only fostered rationality, but more importantly have facilitated the formation of the democratic values of the people. Nowadays, the general public in China show a stronger democratic consciousness and become more aware of their rights as citizens. With the seed of democracy sown in their hearts, people constitute a vital force pushing the political development onto China to the track of democracy. The growth of this force can hardly be neglected even by a powerful government, who as a rational player will understand the potentially large costs for going against the people's demand for more democratic procedures.

According to the current conditions in China, the government is another important factor that can decide the future development of deliberative democracy in China. As discussed in Part Two, the communist government has a sustainable interest in democratic innovations. It has also made several attempts at democratic behaviors and has come to care more about public opinions than before. Whether pushed by its original commitment to represent the people or pressured by the

complex and changing environment, the government will continue its open attitude to democratic reform. Compared to the elections of liberal democracy, its moderate modes, like discussion and influencing, make deliberative democracy a more likely choice for the government. If social stability also treasured by ordinary citizens is taken into consideration, deliberative democracy is a better option for China even in the short term.

Based on the above discussion on people and the government, this paper gives an optimistic prediction for deliberative democracy in China. Furthermore, deliberative democracy in China will be developed to further democratization, rather than being kept as a democratic decoration. This can also be explained from the aspects of the government and the people: the central government authorizes citizens' participation in policy making and institutionalizes it through laws; people's stronger democratic consciousness will make any government's trick of pretending to be democratic intolerable

Democratization in China promoted by deliberative democracy is different from the more general understanding of democratization. While westerners may tend to focus more on electoral voting, the Chinese people put more weight on democratizing public decision making through deliberation. Compared to electing leaders, public decision making is a more basic activity in politics. Also, instead of exposing citizens immediately and directly to voting and elections, deliberative democracy enables the Chinese to adjust themselves to and learn democracy gradually. Incrementally introducing deliberative democracy will facilitate China's shift towards democratization.

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