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In recent years, China has witnessed the development of consultative and deliberative institutions. An increasing number of public hearings have provided people with opportunities to express their opinions on a wide range of issues such as the price of water and electricity, park entry fees, the relocation of farmers, the conservation of historical landmarks, and even the relocation of the famous Beijing Zoo, to name a few. Participatory and deliberative institutions in China can be seen as a deliberative way of democratising China, and they are helping to develop deliberative Chinese citizens. As T.V. Smith and Eduard C. Lindeman pointed out, “Genuine consent, a vital ingredient of the democratic way of life, is the end-product of discussion or conference. Citizens of democratic societies are equipped for their role when they have acquired the skills and the arts of conferring.”

Chinese intellectuals have recently studied and advocated deliberative democracy. Lin Shangli at Fudan University has argued that the deliberative model of democracy is more suitable to China’s local conditions. Chen Jiagang has taken the lead in translating, introducing, and advocating deliberative theories of democracy in China. Li Junru, the Vice President of the Central Party School, has advocated consultative and deliberative institutions. He has called for the development of deliberative institutions in China by drawing on the Chinese political tradition of consultation and improving the Chinese People's Political Consultative Committee (“CPPCC”).

The key question is whether these deliberative institutions will make a substantial contribution to Chinese democratisation. Before one can answer this question, one has to answer the question of whether these deliberative institutions will continue to develop. This chapter will focus on this question. The structure of the chapter is as follows. Section 1 describes briefly recent experiments in developing deliberative institutions. Section 2 identifies the sustainable problem. Section 3 then offers an explanation of three key determinants of the Chinese style of deliberation. Section 4 outlines four approaches to the sustainable development of deliberative institutions.
Development of participatory and deliberative institutions

China has a long-standing tradition of discussion and deliberation on community-related issues at the local community level. Confucian scholars established public forums in which they debated and deliberated national affairs centuries ago. During Mao's time, the "mass line" emphasized the need for public consultation to give value to the voice of the people in the political process. Indeed, the socialist tradition of political participation generally might be a useful resource in developing deliberative and participatory institutions.

The introduction of village elections and the establishment of participatory and deliberative institutions, such as village representative assemblies since the 1980s, and in particular since the late 1990s, has changed the structure of village politics and the political behavior of some 3.2 million "village officials" in the 734,700 villages in China. Since the middle and late 1990s, some villages have developed village representative meetings wherein major decisions on village affairs are discussed, debated, and deliberated upon by village representatives.

Local urban communities have also developed a number of new participatory and deliberative institutions. The Chinese consultative meeting or public hearing is designed to get people's support for local projects and to be a forum for people's opinions. The popular conciliation or mediation meeting is designed to solve various local problems and conflicts. For example, in the Shangcheng district of Hangzhou, a consensus conference or consultation meeting is held once a month. Citizen evaluation, first introduced in Shandong and Shenyang, and then in Shanghai and Hangzhou, is designed to give the ordinary people an opportunity to rate and evaluate the performance of local cadres. The rating seriously affects the political career or the level of performance bonus of local cadres.

The practice of holding public hearings has also developed at the national level. In 1996, the first national law on administrative punishment introduced an article stipulating that a public hearing must be held before any punishment is given. Another famous article 23 of the Law on Price passed by China's National Congress in December 1997 specified that the price of public goods must be decided through public hearing. This was followed by the Law on Legislature, passed in 2000, which requires public hearings to be an integral part of the decision-making process for all legal regulations and laws. More than 50 cities have now held legislative public hearings. On 29 September 2005, a public hearing was held by the National People's Congress (NPC) Standing Committee to decide whether the central government should raise the personal income-tax threshold.

The progress in Wenling City, Zhejiang Province is a good example of successful integration of deliberative institutions. It is a county-level city with a vibrant private economy. In 2004, it was awarded the national prize for Innovations and Excellence in Local Chinese Governance. From 1996 to 2000, more than 1,190 deliberative and consultative meetings were held at the village level, 190 at the township level, and 150 in governmental organizations, schools, and business sectors. Such meetings are called ken tan, meaning "sincere heart-to
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heart discussion”. Some meetings were “one shot” discussions; that is, sessions dealing with only one topic that meet only once. Others were continuing discussions about more complex matters or a series of matters. For example, five deliberative meetings were held to deal with the relocation of the fishery industry. Some meetings were just consultative without connecting with decision-making directly, while others were well connected to policy decision-making through the local people’s congresses.

The development of participatory and deliberative institutions in Wenling City has involved four stages. In the first stage, local leaders found that traditional ideological mobilisation did not work as a mode of persuasion. In 1996, a democratic “heart-to-heart” forum was therefore invented to give villagers a genuine opportunity to express their grief and complaints. However, the villagers who experienced this democratic forum soon discovered that it was only a forum for discussion, not decision-making. Their political enthusiasm decreased, the turnout rate dropped, and disillusionment followed. In the second stage, in order to continue to attract people, the local officials turned this discussion forum into a decision-making mechanism. By 2000, local leaders would respond to questions of participants, and make decisions on the spot.

The third development, in 2004, was a democratic discussion forum attended by the deputies of the local People’s Congress. Local leaders had discovered that if the issue being considered was controversial, decisions made in deliberative meetings gained support from some, but faced opposition from others. In order to defuse its responsibility and gain legitimacy for the policy on any controversial issue, the local party organisation decided that deputies of the local People’s Congress should vote on certain difficult issues in a deliberative meeting – and the result of voting constituted a final decision that overrode the authority of the local party secretary. Leaders held the view that the only reliable and indisputable source of legitimacy is democratic voting, which generates a basis for public will on certain disputable issues. This is an institutional innovation that combines deliberative institutions with the empowerment so sorely lacking in much experimental deliberative democracy in the West.

In the fourth stage, in 2005, Wenling introduced China’s first experiment in Deliberative Polling on a budget issue, adopting methods of social sciences to deliver a scientific basis for public policy. Wenling officials realised the deficiencies of their deliberative meetings, such as unscientific representation and insufficient time for a full discussion. Accordingly, they accepted advice from James Fishkin and myself to use a random sampling method to select the participants to avoid selection bias and to provide well-balanced information to all the participants, who would spend an entire day deliberating over the town’s budget issue.

Posing the problem

These deliberative institutions discussed above have serious deficiencies. The Chinese saying goes, “when the man leaves, the tea cools off”. When it comes to
developing deliberative democratic institutions, once leaders go their ways, institutions slacken off. The place of origin of democratic deliberations – the township of Songmen in Wenling – is a case in point. With changes to the township party committee, the outcomes of the original discussions on fishery were shelved. With the departure of the party secretary of a municipal party committee, the driving force of democratic deliberation was reduced. The original secretary regarded it as his “baby”, nurturing it lovingly and actively promoting it. But the incoming secretary held no such positive attitude. While not negating it, he puts no great effort into promoting it, so the party secretaries at the city level do not earnestly support it, nor is any enthusiasm shown by leaders lower down at the township level. Alternatively, a leader would be promoted due to his innovations, but once in high office he or she would become conservative and cautious, unwilling to run risks with further innovative experiments.

These phenomena are by no means unique to China. In Perth, Western Australia, Janette Hartz-Karp organised some extremely successful deliberative experiment in recent years. A twenty-first-century Town Meeting on the city's development that she organised was attended by over a 1,000 people. But as soon as her superior leader left the leadership, she became “unemployed”. She set up her own non-government organisation (NGO), which continues to drive the development of deliberative democracy in Australia.

It can be seen from this that deliberative democracy is driven by elites. Its survival and key aspects of its development are determined by their will and determination. Can it continue to develop without the support of the governing elite? Can it develop into a widespread daily practice of democratic movement?

The criterion for institutions of deliberative democracy being developed is that at least 50 per cent villages and towns should adopt such procedures to solve problems in practical life. Only then can they have true value. While instructive, the cases that have been successful so far have in terms of this criterion played a very minor role. Economic development in China in recent years has taken place at a rate of 9 per cent per annum. In places like Shenzhen civil associations have grown by over 20 per cent. But the development of institutions of deliberative democracy has been restricted to isolated individual cases with very small size and scale.

This is a worrying problem. The speed of development of institutions of deliberative democracy now lags behind that of the economy and of civil associations. Most local officials still seek solutions to the various social and political issues caused by economic development through coercive mechanisms. When deliberative institutions are absent, people look to non-institutional methods, with deleterious consequences for social stability.

The problem of the sustainable development of deliberative democracy institutions is a major one which cannot be neglected. If such institutions were to develop at a rate of 5 per cent per annum, it would be possible to seek a harmonious society.
Three determinants of deliberative institutions

Before we discuss the sustainability of these institutions, we first need to discuss the conditions under which they occur. Deliberative meetings or roundtables at first were regarded as outside the official system. Transforming them into an institution within the official system is determined by the following three factors:

1. an approving attitude on the part of higher levels;
2. a democratic attitude on the part of the local government;
3. the degree to which the populace need such institutions.

To find acceptance from the higher leadership, deliberative democracy has to be consistent with the existing system and match the mentality of Beijing leaders. And still more important, the Beijing leadership has to see it as useful in solving social problems. In facing the pressures associated with the rapid democratisation in Eastern Europe and Asia, Beijing has tried to develop a new art of ruling that combines administrative order with a consultative mechanism that will bring governments and people together, improve the relations between cadres and the masses, and achieve good governance in local politics. To be sure, Beijing has used deliberative institutions as a form of moderate democracy to avoid a radical and substantial political reform that would directly challenge the political power of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). It is believed that deliberative institutions are peripheral and marginal, so they do not undermine the power of the CCP. And, accordingly, the national government has encouraged the development of the mild form of democracy. As a result, mobilised, consultative, and deliberative institutions have developed even faster than the competitive electoral institutions at the township level and beyond. Still, the inherent logic of deliberative institutions may push China past the moderate form of democracy that was intended by Beijing.

Local leaders have various motivations and incentives to push the development of deliberative institutions. Some officials aim to achieve a genuine consensus so as to gain legitimacy for certain policies, to reduce social conflicts, and even to win personal honour. Others see deliberative institutions as an effective tool to bring about democratic management and monitoring. Still others, however, are under great pressure to introduce these institutions to ease the tension between cadres and the masses. Pressure also comes from the private sector. In some local counties or townships in Zhejiang, private tax contributions constitute more than 70 per cent of the local budget. Private businesspersons and interest groups desire to express their voices about public policies that affect their economic life. As a result, consultation meetings and other institutions are organised in response to the demand from the private sector.

Key to the willingness of grassroots governments to attempt deliberative democratic procedures is their attitude to deliberative democracy. Certain officials in economically developed areas of Zhejiang are starting to be more
intelligent as politicians, fully aware that administrative methods of coercive suppression and harsh control are incapable of solving sharp social conflicts. Deliberative democracy is quite a good mechanism for harmonising conflicts of interests. In 1990, for example, one town leadership used administrative methods to abolish an old market and set aside some new land to open a new market. They encountered widespread popular resistance and protest, with the result that the old market carried on as usual, and the new one was a waste of money. The township leaders learned from this event that they should have convened a democratic roundtable beforehand, soliciting suggestions from the people, and so avoid making a wrong decision.

Some villages and town leaders in Zhejiang have adopted transparent deliberative democratic means to prioritise capital construction projects. In this way avoiding, first, charges of "siphoning off cash", and second, using the public opinion produced by deliberative democracy to convince these not to willing to move from their homes. Third, if there are problems in selecting capital construction projects, these are not the mistaken choices of the leadership, but of the people.

The leaders of the Bianyu village in the Zheguo Township, Wenling City, Zhejiang, were more astute. They held a village-level deliberative democracy conference to discuss the major issues of whether to build housing for migrant workers (whom they called the "new people"). After the village-level deliberative democracy conference decided they should do so, they use this public opinion as an indicator to apply to the higher-level leadership for land to use. Moreover, the village deliberative democracy conference discussed how much the rental of village land and how long the term should be. The village leaders then used the villagers' opinion to negotiate with bosses of the enterprises which were to become their tenants. The greatest advantage of so doing was that the need for the enterprise bosses to treat village leaders a banquet, or bribe them to keep the rent down, was avoided, so the village leaders could be spotless in the villagers' eyes.

These cases show the driving forces for deliberative democracy to be pluralistic and complex, but the main thread is clear: intelligent grassroots politicians have learned to reduce the pressure and responsibility on them by means of deliberative democracy. They avoid the opprobrium associated with corrupt officials and resolving various social conflicts in their localities, and use public opinion to fend off various unreasonable demands. When more grassroots leaders learn the benefits of adopting deliberative democracy, it will develop more quickly and become more widespread.

Many local leaders are unwilling to attempt deliberative democracy. There are all sorts of reasons. First, some leaders regard decision-making as a matter for the leadership; the common people cannot be allowed to join discussions of community policy. Second, some worry that the outcomes of democratic consultation may conflict with the views of the government, and it might be difficult to come to a conclusion. Third, grassroots leaders depend on their own superiors for promotion. Democratic consultation institutions are not included in assess-
ments of merit, so carrying them out provides no grounds for promotion. A scholar once announced a project when giving a class. She stepped down to find a group of grassroots leaders surrounding her, all bidding to get the project for themselves. When they heard it was a democratic consultation pilot project, however, all but one lost interest and turned to leave. This story vividly illustrates the attitude of current grassroots leaders to democratic consultation. It shows why, without the pressure of direct elections at the township level, the grassroots leaders have no incentive to positively promote such institutions.

Popular demand for deliberative democracy is a third important condition. When the majority of the populace demands deliberative democracy conferences be convened to make decisions that accord with public opinion and safeguard their interests, the grassroots local authorities are forced to introduce these mechanisms. What "forces" this is public pressure. When social conflicts and contradictions become extremely sharp, and the existing administrative method are unable to solve them, or can do so only at a very high price, local authorities are forced to adopt deliberative democracy institutions. This is an inherent, deep-seated origin of sustainable development of deliberative democracy. Its motive force originates from the people and from the needs for civilised, transparent, equitable solutions to modern social contradictions and conflict. History teaches us that sustained institutional development must be based on people's needs. Take an example of Mao Zedong who tried every possible way such as waging campaigns through revolutionary songs and handing everything over to Huang Guofeng whom he trusted to institutionalise the Cultural Revolution. But no sooner had he passed away than all his revolutionary effort disappeared. Sustainable development of the Cultural Revolution was a pipedream. The reason was simple: people did not revolution forever, and they were tired of daily "revolution".

**Four approaches to sustainable development of deliberative democracy**

**Institutionalisation**

Institutional solutions to these problems have been adopted in every region in the country. In 2004, Fujian ruled that all villages must hold four village-level democratic hearings a year. As early as 2002, Wenling City ruled that townships must hold four democratic roundtables per annum. The requirements of Document No. 7 for 2004 were to promote the institutionalisation of democratic roundtables and to get real results in making the roundtable conferences, decision-making, management, and supervision democratic. There were to be no less than four per annum at the township/street committee level and two at the village/community level. They were to be awarded four merit points. Responsibility for carrying it out would be shared between the Party's Departments of Organisation and Propaganda. They, moreover, actively carried out collective wages negotiations in non-state enterprises and trades. Various towns (street)
were to develop at least one collective negotiation in a trade, with real results obtained. This would be worth three merit points. The task was taken on by the Department of Propaganda. Chen Yimin, an officer of Wenling City Propaganda Department, devised an examination and assessment system to actively promote the deliberative democracy system. Purely ceremonial or empty shows, such as those concerned with cultural development, would not score points. Because it held no roundtables in 2005, the Taiping Street Committee was docked three points, whereas the Zheguo Township, which that year set up a high grade democratic consultation system, gained four points.

Such institutional methods may to a certain extent solve the problem of the development of the institutions of democratic deliberation stagnating as soon as a leader moves on, but on the other hand they lead to another problem – that of formalism. In order to pass inspections by the city Propaganda Department, the townships under it randomly find a couple of minor issues and call some people to meetings to make up the numbers. This is passive “deliberative democracy”!

Habituation to democracy

The promotion and repeated practice of discussion in Wenling’s deliberative democracy led officials and the peasants in certain regions to come to like this procedure and feel attracted to it. Now, as soon as a major issue appears, they may want to use deliberative democracy methods to solve it. The Zheguo Township in the township of Wenling is a case in point. Party secretary Jiang Zhaohua and Mayor Wang Xiaoyu twice adopted methods of deliberation and public opinion poll in discussing questions of choice in significant public construction projects in the town. When they encountered major issues of land and migration, they also thought of using democratic deliberation methods to set public policy that would be both scientific and based on public opinion.

In some villages in Wenling, democratic discussion has become customary. When village leaders fail to hold democratic roundtable, they ask why not. They jointly demanded that democratic roundtables be held. Not holding the democratic roundtable leads the peasants to complain. This is a new culture and a new pressure. Fujian Province has ruled that one-fifth of villagers or one-third of the villagers representatives may jointly request that a village-level democratic hearing meeting be held. When I myself went down to the countryside to carry out political experiments in recent years, I was delighted to find that the peasants naturally have the very high latent rationality, and given any opportunity for deliberative discussion, their communication ability will develop very quickly. This is the most important resource and source of sustainable development of deliberative institutions.

The significant propelling force of sustainable development of deliberative institutions comes from citizens. When peasants become modern citizens, they seek to safeguard their rights. They demand that deliberative democracy system be put into practice. Sustainable development of democratic institutions is possible only when citizens strive and struggle. Depending only on enlightened leadership without citizens participating, it is placed in question.
The practice of New England town meeting has been an amazing aspect of American democratic tradition. Needing no push from government, such a grassroots institution of deliberative democracy still goes on as before. Only when institutions of democratic consultation become a lifestyle of the people, only when they become a new tradition of the Chinese culture, can they take roots. When Deng Yuwen, a senior reporter of the Central Party School's *Xuexi shibao* [*Study Times*] came to the Zheguo Township to inspect its deliberative democratic institutions, he grasped the key issue: the adaptation and habituation of deliberative democracy.¹⁶

**Political competition**

In recent years, something interesting has happened in local political reform in China: while leadership changes may lead to stagnation of deliberative institutions, better democratic hearing institutions have been emerging elsewhere. Mechanisms of competitive political reform may reduce concerns about the sustainable development of these institutions. In some localities, deliberative democracy comes to an end when the leadership changes. But it doesn't matter, other regions take the opportunity promote their unique institutional innovations for political reform. In many localities, public hearings are fraudulent, formalistic, or the speakers are nominated beforehand. Again, it doesn't matter — such formalistic institutions will eventually be eliminated. People do not attend such meetings and even if they do they give no credence to the outcomes. Cai Dingjian at the Central University of Politics and Law has stated that people are not too happy when legislation hearings are held nowadays, because they are merely "hearings". In a commercial society at an earlier period, fake products could make money for a while. But only genuine goods at reasonable prices are truly a hit with people. The same logic also applies in political sphere slowly. Only genuine deliberative democracy, it can gain the common people's support and trust. In 2005, the Zheguo Township adopted the deliberation polling method to advance deliberative democratic institutions for the first time. That year some 70 per cent of a random sample of over 260 people thought the government would implement the results of the deliberative public opinion poll. In 2006 the Zheguo Township once again adopted this method, some 80 per cent of people thought the government would respect public opinion and carry out its outcomes — an increase of 10 per cent over the previous year. This 10 per cent is the result of genuine deliberative experiments.

We should of course be quite clear that political competition in the area of the institutional innovations takes place in the absence of direct elections of township leaders. This implies a limitation of such current political competition: it is restricted to competition between people who want to promote political reform, and the common people are unable to eliminate corrupt officials through the election mechanism.
Intellectual impulse

NGOs play a very big role in pushing sustainable development of deliberative democracy in Western advanced democracies. They can maintain its independence and advance and perfect it. But in China, "NGOs" are politically controlled, their roles in promoting deliberative democracy are limited. Private enterprise association is inherently against deliberation; the chairman or manager often exercises total dominance. On the level of values, it is very difficult to accept and promote institutions of deliberative democracy. The founder of America’s Marriot hotels said, he always disliked deliberation and discussion as a waste of time and missed opportunity.

The potential role of Chinese scholars is huge. In modern history, Liang Shuming, the last Confucius, formulated the idea of communicative rationality, the philosophical foundation of deliberative democracy, 50 years earlier than Jürgen Habermas. He devoted himself to rural reconstruction project which aims to develop peasants’ communicative rationality capabilities. Perhaps today the development of deliberative institutions in rural China is a historical return to this Chinese tradition. One may alternatively say that it stimulates a historical gene, restores or continues what Liang Shuming was unable to complete in the past – through developing folk communicative rationality to construct a new countryside. Deliberative democracy is an advance of Liang Shuming’s idea of communicative rationality and is to complete the historical mission Liang Shuming began.

Scholars are a force that can guarantee sustainable development of institutions of deliberative democracy. Intellectuals help local authorities to practically carry out each deliberative democracy conference and may directly help enrich specific villages, townships, and towns. This is more valuable than publishing one or two academic articles which a handful of people may want to know about. Their mission lies in uncovering grassroots problems, and researching and comparing various methods of solving them. The further down Chinese deliberative and democratic institution goes, the greater the demand for it, the greater its vitality. The further downward intellectuals go, the greater is society’s demand for them, and the higher the value of their life. Intellectuals are another significant power and resource for promoting and safeguarding the sustainable development of regional institutions of deliberative democracy.

Notes

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7 Chen Jiagang, ed. and trans., Deliberative Democracy (Shanghai: Shanghai Sanlian Publishers, 2004).
11 Zhu Mang, Multiple Dimensions of Administrative Law (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2004). Chapter 1 is devoted to the topic of public hearing on administrative punishment.
13 See the official document, Democratic Sincerely Talk: The Innovation from Wenling, compiled by the Department of Propaganda, Wenling city, 2003, p. 98.