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INTRODUCTION

Authoritarian deliberation revisited



Q1 Q2 Baogang He* and Hendrik Wagenaar 
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Abstract

This introductory paper reviews the origin and development of the concept of authoritarian deliberation, and highlights the importance of culture and cultural tradition associated with public consultation. This paper summarizes and illustrates six key features of authoritarian deliberation in China. First, deliberation in China is a precarious balance between legal rule and state intervention. Second, the Party appeals to public reason to address and manage social conflict, and develop the soft coercion that accompanies much authoritarian deliberation. Third, this highly controlled deliberative process does, however, allow the freedom of local participants to find spaces for democratic expression, and local experiments to develop elements of deliberative democracy. Fourth, authoritarian deliberation is characterized by mutual instrumentalism. Fifth, there is an importance of an administrative and policy perspective in authoritarian deliberation. Six, the concept of authoritarian deliberation is not limited to China. There is the convergence in real-world deliberative process and outcome between authoritarian and liberal democratic systems.

Q3 Key words: 

1. Cultural diversity and democratic deliberation

Q4 Since its introduction in Baogang He and Mark Warren's article the authoritarian deliberation thesis has been an uncomfortable presence in the literature on democratic deliberation (He, 2013: 60) 
Confronting scholars with the possibility of rational communication in the bosom of an authoritarian political regime that blatantly violates human rights, inevitably led to doubts about the democratic nature of what happened at the local level in China (O'Flynn and Curato 2015 , Weber and Froehlich, 2016). In contrast to these sceptical statements we argue in this special issue that the authoritarian deliberation thesis is not only a challenge to western theories of deliberative democracy, but that it also offers a great opportunity for democracy theorists, comparative politics researchers, and public policy scholars to expand new research territories – both in authoritarian contexts, and, perhaps surprisingly, also in liberal–electoral democracies.

The concept of authoritarian deliberation is a theoretical reflection on Chinese local institutional innovations which respond to the needs of people through the articulation and aggregation of individual preferences and interests, predominantly through public meetings or forums, which are in turn informed by detailed procedures, some of them codified in national and/or local laws. Since the middle and latter 1990s, some villages have developed village representative meetings wherein major decisions on village affairs are discussed, debated, and deliberated upon by everyday people of the village through representatives. Local urban communities have also developed a number of new participatory and deliberative institutions. Public hearings, for example, are designed to get people's support for local projects as well as to be a forum for people's opinions. In 2005, Zeguo town, in Wenling city, introduced China's first experiment in deliberative polling, adopting social science methods to deliver a scientific basis for its public policy. In this instance, deliberative polling was carried out on matters relating to the town's budgeting issues (Fishkin *et al.*, 2010).

The term authoritarian deliberation was originally coined in a book chapter (He, 2006: 134–5) and later developed into a more rigorous theoretical construct (He and Warren, 2011). It was further explored through examining the historical, cultural, linguistic, and moral sources of authoritarian deliberation, demonstrating its long cultural and political life as well as its problematic areas (He, 2014). The ‘authoritarian deliberation’ thesis demonstrated that a high level of public deliberation, with sound reasoning and proper procedures, happens not only in liberal democratic societies but also in authoritarian states such as China. Deliberation practices at the local level are in fact actively promoted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as a strategy for improving governance and strengthening the authority and legitimacy of the state. The aim of the CCP is to construct a so-called ‘socialist deliberative democracy.’ This local deliberative democracy with Chinese characteristics can be seen as an uneasy and unstable ‘marriage’ of democratic (participation, deliberation, and limited empowerment) and authoritarian (heavy handed top-down rule, despotism, disempowerment of dissident groups, and erosion of human rights) elements. This ‘marriage’ is situated firmly within policy processes that incorporate mechanisms and procedures to reduce and control social conflicts against the background of economic, political, and social developments and complex governing issues in China.

The critics of the authoritarian deliberation thesis question the democratic nature of Chinese public deliberation. They argue that it is merely consultation, a public show, or symbolic manipulation. Even if it is deliberative, its democratic nature is questionable (Weber and Froehlich, 2016). Despite the criticisms of Deliberative Polling experiments in China, its main features are said to be fairness, citizen representation, citizen empowerment, and the establishment of a genuine collective will among peoples. Other key features are said to be its supervised and sophisticated deliberative practices, and its ability to impact decision-making processes such as that made by a city or township (Fishkin *et al.*, 2010; He 2018). Yet, critics have argued that in China these benefits can best be seen as a sort of ‘phantom democracy’ (Keane, 2017). Even though authoritarian deliberation involves and promotes careful reasoning, it is claimed that it has nothing to do with democracy (O’Flynn and Curato, 2015), but is instead a sort of ‘participation without democracy’ (Rodan, 2018). The authoritarian deliberation thesis proposes the concepts of ‘deliberative authoritarianism’ and ‘deliberation-led democratization’ (He and Warren, 2011), however, these two concepts are speculative and the possible trajectories of political development are uncertain and contingent.

To address the above criticisms and to explore the concrete mechanisms and theoretical implications of the authoritarian deliberation thesis, we organized two panels on authoritarian deliberation in the Third International Conference on Public Policy in Singapore in June 2017 and an international workshop on the same theme in Melbourne in December 2017. Our call emphasized that we were interested in papers that combined detailed empirical research on deliberative practices in China with ‘mid-level’, explanatory conceptualization, explanations that make theoretical sense of the data (Charmaz, 2006). In other words, we were interested in the question of the position, function, and quality of talk-based decision-making strategies in collective problem solving in China. This raises the question from what perspective we interpret concrete cases of deliberation in China. Deliberations in China and Western democracies have emerged in different historical contexts, been guided by different values, and have followed discrepant institutionalization trajectories.

What were the insights and themes that emerged from the papers and the ensuing discussions? In this introduction, we want to highlight some of the main themes that have emerged in the papers and the subsequent discussions. But before we attend to these, we want to draw attention to a challenge that suffuses all the work on deliberation in authoritarian settings. One of the main experiences of the authors and editors involved in this special issue is the difficulty in talking and writing about deliberation in China in a genuinely impartial way. Time and again scholars from Western countries found themselves almost automatically applying assumptions about Western liberal democracy to the interpretation of deliberative phenomena in China – and, unsurprisingly, finding them to fall short. Chinese scholars, on the other hand, either demonstrated a somewhat defensive attitude or, alternatively, were eager to show the successes of deliberation ‘according to

Chinese characteristics.’ These implicit biases were often hard to recognize because they manifested themselves as habitual linguistic expression.

There are important issues of cultural diversity at play here. Democratic deliberation is fairly precisely described in the literature on democratic theory and to water it down too much would amount to concept stretching (Bächtiger *et al.*, 2010). However, the Habermasian criteria of communicative rationality have emerged from within (and as a defense of) the tradition of liberal democratic theory and are therefore ‘frontloaded’ with liberal democratic assumptions about individual freedom and autonomy and how to forge these into just and effective procedures of collective problem solving (Habermas, 1984; Cohen, 1989). Chinese scholars have shown how effective deliberation, according to criteria of mutual respect, sincere talk, complete information, and the willingness to broach difficult topics, flourished within settings that were more hierarchical, elitist, and autocratic (He, 2014). Instead of personal freedom, autonomy, and equality, deliberation in China operates under a different, Confucian, moral code that includes concepts such as people-centric (*min ben*), humanness (*ren*), ritual (*li*), harmony (*hexie*), and gentleman (*junzi*). These virtues only make sense if we understand them as the deontic elements that undergird a cultural–political order. As He (2014, 62) puts it:

‘The domination of these terms indicated a political order in which the rule of gentlemen prevailed, the notion of duty was central, moral concerns override political bargaining processes, and harmony won over conflict. The practice of *yi* (deliberation) was carried out by *junzi* and regulated by the moral principle of *ren* and *li*.’

Unless we decide to reject deliberative quality to these processes of joint reasoning in China, democratic scholars need to patiently and carefully sift through the evidence to understand them as instances of reasoned collective problem solving in different cultural settings.

Most of the papers implicitly or explicitly raise the issue of cultural perspective. Eighteen papers in total were presented and six were selected for this special issue. These papers carry out empirical studies of deliberative governance in various Chinese settings, offer theoretical reflections, and make an intellectual contribution to the study of authoritarian deliberation. Below we draw out six themes regarding authoritarian deliberation from the papers selected for this special issue. These are: the guided nature of authoritarian deliberation, the soft coercion that accompanies much authoritarian deliberation, the freedom of local participants to find spaces for democratic expression, the precarious balance between manipulation and moral sincerity in local deliberation, the lack of an administrative and policy perspective in deliberative theory, and the convergence in real-world deliberative process and outcome between authoritarian and liberal democratic systems.

2. Developing the concept of authoritarian deliberation

Through their case studies, the six papers illustrate key features of authoritarian deliberation in China (and indirectly in Western liberal democracies). First, deliberation in China is a *precarious balance between legal rule and state intervention*. Although deliberation in many policy situations is legally mandated, the center initiates, controls, and regulates public deliberation through the Party leadership and different policy instruments and informal practices. One aim of public deliberation is to provide public space, but this ‘public’ space is defined from the state’s perspective, and often the public sphere is an extension of the state, rather than a civic domain that operates independently from the state. In particular, the question of whether particular forms of public deliberation are legal or illegitimate is decided by the Party; whereby the Party claims to represent a paternalistic, benevolent authority that is in the best position to balance collective interest and ‘people-centric’ values. For example, in urban areas, local authorities, through residential committees or village committees, initiate and coordinate grassroots deliberation among middle class (Tang, this issue) or village residents (Niu and Wagenaar, this issue). This contrasts with the Western concept of deliberative legitimacy as being ultimately derived from ideals that are vested in citizens as the bearers of liberal democratic

ideals of freedom, equality and justice, as beneficiaries of the rule of law, and as denizens of the civil sphere (Alexander, 2006).

Second, *the Party appeals to public reason to address and manage social conflicts* (He and Warren, 2017; He, 2018; also see Rodan, 2018). Indeed, surveys among participants to public deliberation reveal that the participants perceived a high level of public deliberation (Qin and He, 2018), and that the organizers of grassroots deliberative meetings provided sufficient information in advance, and ensured that a diversity of opinions were presented and debated (Tong and He, 2018). However, this public reason is constrained by political techniques, for example, informal meetings are held before formal public deliberation, local officials conduct face-to-face house-visits (Niu and Wagenaar, 2018), and family members or friends are often asked to join in order to persuade ‘trouble-makers’ to accept the deal offered by the local governments. To put it bluntly, public deliberation is often augmented by the forms of ‘soft coercion.’

Third, *this highly controlled deliberative process does, however, allow local experiments to develop elements of deliberative democracy* (He and Warren, 2017; Fishkin, 2018; He, 2018). The central government offers a certain measure of local autonomy and flexibility, and local governments often develop limited empowerment mechanisms in order to make public deliberation workable (Qin and He 2018). Paternalist leaders do not grant such limited empowerment as a gift; rather it is the result of popular resistance (see the chapter on paternalist concept of democracy, He, 1996). Under market conditions, Chinese citizens often engage in popular protest or refuse to attend public consultation meetings. Niu and Wagenaar found that village residents used their legal right to vote down a compensation proposal in the ‘announcement’ stage of official village deliberation. When they were nevertheless still ignored they protested by engaging in a ‘participation strike’, refusing to engage in any more communication with the authorities. Officials then reopened the deliberations after which the participating actors jointly managed to arrive at a creative solution to the problem at hand that satisfied all parties at the table. In the wider context of a deliberative system such actions, partly legal, partly informal, exploring the boundaries of the subversive within an authoritarian environment, can be seen as a critical component of deliberation (Niu and Wagenaar, 2018). Participation strikes have forced local governments to make public deliberation a partially empowered process so that it can attract participants, and importantly, solve daily problems and implement decisions more effectively and legitimately. Indeed, there is substantive evidence to support the existence of limited empowerment (Tong and He, 2018). An important effect of deliberation in authoritarian settings is that it dampens civic activism and results in complacency with the regime. In fact, this manufacturing of consent is one of the main reasons for such regimes to endorse deliberation at the local level (Qin and He, 2018). However, as shown by a survey of citizen participants to deliberative pricing, limited empowerment in the interstices of the complex, scalar Chinese governance system is likely to moderate this demobilization effect (Qin and He, 2018).

The fourth theme is related to the preceding one: *Authoritarian deliberation is characterized by mutual instrumentalism*. While the Party deploys it strategically for its political gain (to avoid regime-level democratization through the promotion of deliberative democracy (Qin and He, 2018)), citizens game deliberative procedures for material gain (Niu and Wagenaar, 2018; Tang 2018). Seen in this way, deliberative democracy with Chinese characteristics can be seen as a conservative project that aims to manage societal conflicts. However, there is more to these strategic games than meets the eye. To engage in deliberative encounters is not a purely cynical activity. It is likely that in the course of deliberating a contentious issue at least some of the underlying values that support deliberation are likely to influence participants’ understanding of their own and others’ motives and preferences. Indeed, as we found, officials, constrained by imperative policy goals and tight project deadlines, also endorse ‘deliberative’ values such as fairness, ‘public-mindedness’ and adherence to collective interest (He, 2014, 64; Niu, and Wagenaar, 2018). Interestingly, many Chinese officials believe in the intrinsic value of democracy based on their understanding of Confucian peoplehood (*Menben*) and the Party’s mass line, and these officials tend to support and endorse public deliberation out of faith, rather than purely acting on instrumental grounds (Zhang

and Meng, 2018). Future studies need to trace *the intellectual transformation from an instrumental to intrinsic understanding of democracy among Chinese elites and citizens*, which holds a key for Chinese democratic development. Similarly, citizens are not purely driven by material considerations, but also by values of fairness and social justice. Niu and Wagenaar (2018) show how citizens' protests were spurred by what they perceived as the authorities' denial of the pain of being displaced and corruption among elite decision-makers.

The fifth theme is about *the importance of an administrative and policy perspective* in deliberative theory. Habitually authoritarian deliberation tends to be discussed with an eye on the question of the democratic quality and prospects of China. However, in their original formulation He and Warren (2012) already argued that deliberation in China emerges in policy settings where the authorities' capacity to deal with complex collective issues has reached its limits. For over half a century policy scholars have acknowledged the necessity of dealing with complexity in formulating and implementing public policy (Lindblom, 1959; Wildavsky, 1979; Dryzek, 1990; Wagenaar, 2007). Any administration, democratic or authoritarian, with dispersed or centralized authority, has to face the challenge of dynamic complexity and emergent system states. A common answer to these challenges is to increase diversity and interaction in the input to the policy system; 'more cogitation in interaction' as Dryzek calls it (1990, 69; Axelrod and Cohen, 2001). Authoritarian deliberation can be seen as an attempt to harness complexity within a centralized and authoritarian governing system. Apart from the 'regular complexity that follows from human intervention in natural and large social systems' (Wildavsky, 1979, 64), the CCP is well aware that the complex, multi-scalar nature of the Chinese administrative system adds another layer to governance complexity and puts severe limits on its capacity to govern effectively. Introducing a measure of communicative rationality in the policy system by deliberating with citizens at lower levels of government is an accepted way to harness natural and administrative complexity.

Although this was hardly appreciated at the time, the policy dimension of authoritarian deliberation represented an important advance in deliberative theory. For deliberation to have any truck with real-world problems of collective problem solving in complex, dispersed settings inevitably requires compromises with the criteria of Type I communicative rationality.¹ Such settings will include non- or anti-deliberative behaviors such as deception, manipulation, bone-hard negotiation, hidden agendas, forum-hopping, insisting on procedure, backroom dealing and so on. Yet, from a systemic perspective the overall process and outcome of such processes can sometimes still be called deliberative, albeit in a constrained and imperfect, but ultimately democratically enriching, way. Although there is a budding literature on dispersed deliberation in so called deliberative systems (Parkinson and Mansbridge, 2012) many questions remain unanswered. As Niu and Wagenaar (2018) argue deliberation and public policy exist in an uneasy relationship with each other.

Administrators have played a variety of role in deliberative design and process. Yet, deliberative theory lacks an administrative perspective. Deliberative theory faces a number of related intellectual challenges here. First, how can administrators include deliberative procedures in the varied and often inchoate range of policy instruments and administrative procedures that make up a real-world policy initiative? How do administrators reconcile the pressures of narrow goal achievement with the more measured pace of deliberative procedure? How can the short-termism of many policy initiatives be reconciled with the more measured and patient exchange of arguments in a deliberative procedure? How can administrators bring deliberative outcomes to bear on decision-making and policy implementation? How can deliberative influence be reconciled with the myriad procedures, norms, and standards that govern the modern administrative state? And, how can administrators and elected

¹Type I deliberation is ideal-type deliberation. According to Bächtiger *et al.* (2010: 33), it 'is rooted in the Habermasian logic of communicative action, and embodies the idea of rational discourse, focuses on deliberative intent and the related distinction between communicative and strategic action, and has a strong procedural component. In this view, deliberation implies a systematic process wherein actors tell the truth, justify their positions extensively, and are willing to yield to the force of the better argument.'

officials prevent that their habitual and deeply ingrained habits of unilateral decision making undermine the deliberative process? Experience shows that when public administrators promote deliberation in order to enhance governance and administrative efficiency, they are likely to undermine or manipulate deliberative democracy. Within an administrative power deliberation tends to become ritualized and symbolic, or a post hoc rationalization of a decision. An administrative power tends to coopt and manipulate deliberation to achieve ‘consensus’ without any real consensus.

Without adequate attention to these real-world challenges deliberative democracy cannot develop, nor is it sustainable. We need to develop an account of how deliberative democracy operates in real political life; an administrative perspective of deliberative democracy. If we like it or not, public officials (or public entrepreneurs, or public administrators) play a central role in deliberative democracy. If we want deliberative democracy to be more than a convenient way to produce consent among the population, it is imperative that we understand how these officials view, endorse, or resist deliberative democracy and also how they develop and implement public policies through deliberation. This understanding is critical in order to further develop the cause of deliberative democracy (Zhang and Meng, 2018).

Finally, *the concept of authoritarian deliberation is not limited to China*. Other authoritarian states like Vietnam and Cuba share similar features. In Singapore, since 1991 there have been at least four major exercises of public consultation: ‘Next Lap’ in 1991, ‘Singapore 21’ in 1997, ‘Remaking Singapore’ in 2002, and ‘Our Singapore Conversation’ (OSC) in 2013. OSC was ‘state-controlled public policy dialogue’ contributing to the 9.8% swing back to the People’s Action Party in the 2015 election (Rodan, 2018: 10). Strikingly, according to Romano (2018), key features of authoritarian deliberation also exist in public hearings on urban redevelopment in Paris and other European cities. Although there are vast differences between the political systems of China and France, citizen participation regularly faces a similar fate in the policy formation and implementation stages: while participation is urgently needed to deal with complex governance issues, citizens are far from empowered in the decision-making process, and the agenda and policies are often pre-decided. In both China and France (and many other countries), certain forms of participation and deliberation are now mandated by law. Yet, this does not make these processes immune from gaming and subversion, mostly by authorities with hidden agendas. In some cases, what authorities in Western democracies present as a participative, deliberative process turns out to be mere window dressing when it turns out that decision-making is determined by a priori agendas or backroom deals between governing authorities and corporate elites (Romano 2018).

Q5

One could speculate that we are witnessing an intriguing convergence in the twenty first century of political regimes in the East and the West, and the ensuing collapse of the Huntington dualism of liberal democratic vs authoritarian regimes. Rather than Keane’s concept of phantom democracy, instead we see forms of *deconstructed democracy* in which democracy is likely to be deconstructed by political power holders who creatively and contingently employ democratic tools, such as polls, surveys, referenda, citizen juries, internet platforms, deliberative forums and so on, and always ensure that the remit of these tools are limited, to obtain consent and bolster legitimacy. At the same time *deconstructed democracies* rely on active strategies of de-democratization, the erosion of decision making power over issues that matter to citizens, by different means such as the transfer of decision-making to unelected bodies, the demonization of an independent judiciary and press, the rigging of election rules, the tendentious framing of collective issues, the manipulation of social media to influence elections, by financing think tanks, and supporting academic research with dark money, and above all, through the economization of collective institutions and personal affairs subjecting public and private life to a generalized cost-benefit calculus (Brown, 2017). Based on its assessment of the specific combination of challenges, risks and needs, a regime will employ a bricolage of such guided instruments of democratization and de-democratization.

The concept of *deconstructed democracy* allows the analyst to escape the normative hold of the Huntington dualism and, on the basis of careful empirical research into governance practices, to position a particular regime on a continuum of more to less democratic. For example, it absolves the

analysts of China to speculate if the regime will become more or less democratic (in an implicit Huntingtonian manner). All we know for certain is that the regime has a continuing need to avoid collapse and support legitimacy, and that it will use creative democratic-looking techniques, at the local level and tied to specific policy domains, to do so.

A good example of such a convergent similarity is deliberation's role in contributing to the dominant ideology and practice of governance. In cases where decisions are difficult and inflict losses, deliberative processes implicate citizens into the decision-making process, thereby enabling leaders to deflect responsibility for the decision onto these citizens and avoid blame (Weaver, 1986). In China, for example, elites are recognizing that 'I decide' implies 'I take responsibility.' But 'we decide' implies 'included citizens are also responsible,' thus providing political cover for officials who have to make tough decisions. In Europe, participation processes are often accompanied by a rhetoric of duties and responsibilities and a more active role of citizens in the management of their neighborhoods (van Eijck, 2018). There are no inherent objections to this principle of mutuality when citizens have real influence over political-administrative decision-making, but when this influence is merely symbolic, participation/deliberation has the effect of implicating the citizens' consent into the hegemonic authoritarian (China) or neoliberal (Western Europe) order. Unless we are willing to turn a blind eye to these perversions of participatory, deliberative processes in liberal democracies in the name of liberal doctrine, we have no alternative than painstaking empirical-conceptual research into the functioning of these deliberative systems.

These similarities in the governing practices in China and Western democracies force democracy and policy scholars to rethink the notion of authoritarianism. Comparing participatory and deliberative experiences in France and China it appears that there are more authoritarian moments in the business-as-usual of governing and public administration in Western democracies than scholars and officials prefer to acknowledge. We need a better understanding *how deep authoritarian rule reaches into democratic governance processes*, what sites of governance are affected, at what point authoritative decision-making shades into outright authoritarianism, and how these pockets of authoritarian rule affect the efficacy and legitimacy of democratic government. What the papers in this special issue demonstrate is that the similarities between democratic and authoritarian countries such as China extend *beyond elite misconduct to reach into their structural and ideological foundations*. Both governance systems have to negotiate remarkably comparable challenges in dealing with complex policy challenges in an effective and legitimate way (Niu and Wagenaar, 2018; Tang 2018). Both balance authoritarian rule and communicative rationality, although in different mixes. And, finally, both systems find that they have to attain effectiveness and legitimacy as essential conditions for regime stability.

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