

We Need to Talk More About China's Socialist Democracy

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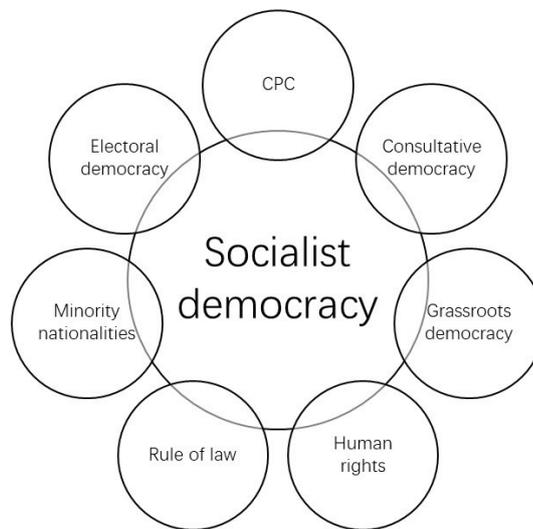
We need to talk more – much more – about China's socialist democratic system. Why? There are many reasons, but the main reason is that we should not let the criticisms of China from the small number of “Western” countries set the agenda. So let me propose the following thesis: China's socialist democratic system is already quite mature and superior to any other democratic system. Actually, this is not my proposition, but that of a host of Chinese specialists. They are very clear that China's socialist democratic system is already showing its latent quality. Obviously, we need to know much more about how this system works and how it is constantly improving.

Before I proceed, let me ask you to put aside your preconceptions and assumptions concerning the meaning of “democracy.” If you come from one of the few “Western” countries, you will need – as Mao Zedong pointed out many years ago – to wash your brain of your assumptions concerning “democracy.” There is no such thing as “democracy” per se, but only historical forms of democracy. Of these, Western-style capitalist democracy – limited to periodic elections for candidates from a limited number of political parties – is only one form, and quite thin at that.

By contrast, socialist democracy, with now more than a century of development, is quite different and increasingly mature.

Overview

To begin with an overview: the system (制度 *zhidu*) of socialist democracy in China has seven integrated structures or institutional forms (体制 *tizhi*): electoral democracy; consultative democracy; grassroots democracy; minority nationalities policy; rule of law; human rights; and leadership of the Communist Party. Let me use a diagram to illustrate:



Obviously, I cannot deal with all of these components here, let alone the political theory that arises from the practice. I have written elsewhere on these matters in *Socialism with Chinese Characteristics: A Guide for Foreigners* (Springer 2021), I refer the reader to that work. It has copious references to Chinese language works. Here I would like to focus on electoral, consultative, and base-level (grassroots) democracy.

Electoral Democracy

In China, electoral democracy is practised mainly with regard to the people's congresses. Given that China has stepped onto the centre of the world stage, there is increasing attention – albeit misguided in some parts – on the National People's Congress (NPC) that meets once a year, usually in March or April. Thousands of elected delegates come to Beijing to make major decisions. Indeed, the NPC is the highest legislative authority in China, and for anything to become law it must be approved by the NPC.

However, the NPC is part of a much wider structure. There are five levels of such congresses, with the most basic level found in villages, minority nationality townships, and towns.

1. National People's Congress (first met in September 1954)
2. Congresses in provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities directly administered by the central government

3. Congresses in sub-districts of larger cities and in autonomous prefectures
4. Congresses of cities not sub-divided, municipal districts, counties, and autonomous counties
5. Congresses in villages, minority nationality townships, and towns

Given that China has a population of 1.4 billion, this means that there are many, many people's congresses across the country.

How do elections work? All of the congresses require delegates to be elected.

All very well, but do people vote? Every citizen over the age of 18 has the right to vote and there are strict regulations concerning the number of candidates and number of voters required for an election to be valid. Every citizen has the right to vote, and only when more than 50% of eligible voters in a district actually vote is an election valid. The candidate with the majority of votes is elected.

Who can stand for election? Any citizen may stand for election. Candidates can be nominated by all political parties and mass organisations. A candidate can also be nominated by ten eligible voters in direct elections and by ten delegates in indirect elections.

How many candidates stand for election? The basic rule is that the number of candidates must be more than the number of delegates to be elected. In direct elections, the number of candidates must be 30%-100% more than the number of delegates elected; in indirect elections, the excess of candidates to delegates elected must be 20%-50%.

Why do I distinguish between direct and indirect elections? Elections to the lowest two levels of the people's congresses are direct, with local people voting for candidates. The next three levels are indirect, which simply means that delegates from the lower levels of people's congresses can be elected to higher levels. Thus, by the time the 3,000 or so delegates prepare to go to Beijing for the NPC, there has already been an extraordinarily detailed process to elect them for this task.

Are candidates vetted? Of course, since you need experienced and quality people, with the necessary skills and abilities to make a real contribution to people's well-being. That they should be supporters – albeit critical – of China's socialist system goes without saying.

Can electoral democracy be improved? Unlike the few Western countries, which have stagnating and now fragmenting political systems, China's electoral democracy is

seen as a constant work in progress. When you immerse yourself in the immense amount of analysis and research in China, you will find many proposals, such as improving the system of elections to people's congresses; ensuring the principle of the same vote in urban and rural areas; enhancing the ability of the standing committees of people's congresses so as to undertake the work of the congresses when the latter are not meeting; further education as how the system works so that people can participate in a more informed manner; ensuring that all eligible voters can physically vote, including migrant workers from the countryside; and improved supervision of the organs of governance so as to eliminate bribery and ensure more efficient functionality.

One question remains: observers used to the antagonistic politics of Western countries – in which everything becomes a focus of political point-scoring (think of COVID-19) – struggle to understand how voting works in the NPC. Most resolutions are passed, usually with a huge majority. Is the NPC, then, simply a “rubber stamp” for the will of ... (fill in the blank). Not at all, but in order to understand how this works, let us turn to consultative democracy.

Consultative Democracy

Let me begin this section with some history. While people's congresses date back to the 1940s,¹ the reality and practice of consultative democracy is even older and more deep-rooted. The key is to be found in the “mass line (群众路线 *qunzhong luxian*),” which was developed in liberated Red Areas during the long revolutionary struggle. While we find early elaborations on the practice and theory of the mass line in the works of Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Zhou Enlai and others, it was, of course, Mao who coined the slogan “from the masses, to the masses” – a practice that arose from concrete experiences of integrating the will of the non-Party masses with the policies of the CPC.

We need to understand the terminology used here. To begin with, the term “masses (群众 *qunzhong*)” is rich in its connotations: it designates the rural and urban workers who form the bedrock of the CPC. At the same time, the term “masses” overlaps significantly with the term “people (人民 *renmin*).” In this light, expressions such as “the Party leads the people” or “taking the people as centre (以人民为中心 *yi renmin wei zhongxin*)” also mean “the Party leads the masses” and “taking the masses as the centre.” Further, “mass organisations” play a crucial role in China's political system. They are

¹ The practice followed Mao's instruction in 1940: “China may now adopt a system of people's congresses, from the national people's congress down to the provincial, county, district and township people's congresses, with all levels electing their respective governmental bodies” (Mao 1940, , 352).

neither social organisations of the sort found in bourgeois civil society and in tension with the state, nor are they Communist Party organisations. Instead, mass organisations are distinct and have a “mass character (群众性 *qunzhongxing*),” with deep political roots and a long history. In short, they represent public concerns that are not directly connected with the structures of governance.

How does the mass line work? Let me quote the scholar Ma Yide (2017, 27): the mass line “is inclusive, as the opinions of the broad mobilised masses are listened to; it is guided by reason, as the views of the masses are studied and become the views of the central system; it achieves balance through reflection, as opinions are constantly tested through the actions of the masses; and it links consultation and decision-making, as the views of the masses are elevated into action.”

From this long history of practice, what is known as consultative democracy arose in the New China. Today it takes many forms, including:

1) Institutionalisation in the many levels of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conferences (CPPCC). The top-level CPPCC meets at the same time as the CPC, providing detailed advice and consultation concerning legislation to the many committees and delegates at the NPC.

2) The many levels of CPPCCs include delegates from all representative groups, including the eight other political parties, minority nationalities, religious bodies, mass organisations, and new social groups such as migrant workers. This is not to say delegates from these groups cannot be elected to the people's congresses, for they are elected to those bodies as well.

3) The ever-expanding forms of consultation and feedback. These include the old-fashioned but irreplaceable practice of face to face discussion, but this is now supplemented by a plethora of on-line consultation and feedback, soliciting proposals, and much, much more. Here too can we find the myriad apps on mobile phones, which one can use for feedback and voicing opinion. With many decades of experience, Chinese people are well accustomed to such practices and are vocal indeed about all manner of issues.

4) Consultation is the standard practice in the multitude of meetings that take place, whether in mass and social organisations, multi-level people's congresses, Party organisations at all levels (which are also concerned with Party building), rural and urban community self-government organisations, and migrant labourers from the countryside. This democratic practice has influenced the forms of urban and rural governance, policy

agendas (from local budgets to the national five-year plans), the structure of direct elections at the grassroots level, and labour-management relations.

5) Base-level or grassroots democracy is also a form of consultative democracy, but I will discuss this practice in the next section.

So we have two substantial forms of democratic practice in China, each with a long history and – crucially – each engaged with and influencing one another. The way they work together has both deep cultural roots and a distinct Marxist emphasis, in which non-antagonistic contradictions are the key to socialist construction. But this is to stray into theory, so let me return to the question I raised at the close of the previous section: voting patterns in the NPC.

For those used to Western-style antagonistic politics, to “mud-slinging,” political point-scoring, and “parliamentary privilege” under which a politician is free from being prosecuted for defamation and slander, the practices in China may seem a little strange. The key lies in the dialectical interaction of both electoral and consultative democracy, in which they complement one another through their strengths and are able to resolve respective limitations.

For the NPC, by the time a piece of legislation comes up for a vote, it has undergone an extremely long and arduous process of deliberation and consultation. Multiple meetings – in the many bodies mentioned earlier – take place, feedback is sought, and differences in opinion are aired without holding back. Indeed, contrary arguments are encouraged and expected, with debate, revision, and further debate until a consensus is reached. Only then can the legislation arrive at the NPC for a vote.

Grassroots Democracy

A distinct type of consultative democracy is “base-level (基层 *jiceng*)” democracy, or what is known in English as “grassroots democracy.” At one level, this type of democracy is the oldest type in human history. We may call it “base-level communism,” and it goes back – in different forms – for millennia. Friedrich Engels, for example, devoted considerable attention to old European practices, especially in Germany’s “Mark association (*Markgenossenschaft*).” And Marx found he had to respond to questions from Russian socialists already in the 1880s, since the latter were debating whether the Russian “village commune” could provide a path to communism without having to go through all of the stages of capitalist development.

At a more specific level, grassroots democracy has developed its own forms over many decades in China as part of its socialist democratic system. We find it emerging during the period of revolutionary struggle and in the political structures of the Red Areas, as well as the “small parliaments [小议会 *xiaoyihui*]” typical of rural areas and the mostly spontaneous urban committees in the 1950s. My interest here is in a new stage of developing grassroots democracy from the first decade of the new millennium. By now there are tens – if not hundreds – of thousands of local examples from which to draw insights. And if you dig into the analysis and research on the practices of grassroots democracy, you find an immense amount of material.

Many of these practices began with participatory budgeting, and then expanded into many other areas of local governance. We find in villages in remote mountainous areas, in the urban districts of major cities, and in many towns and smaller cities. Out of a very large number of examples, let us consider two examples, the first concerning participatory budgeting in Wuxi city, Jiangsu province, and the second from Dengzhou, a small county-level city in Henan province.

Wuxi, Jiangsu Province

The practice of participatory budgeting Wuxi dates from 2006 and is known as “sunshine finance (阳光财政 *yangguang caizheng*).”² It signals an earlier stage in the long process of combating corruption among some city administrators, and was developed to include local people in the crucial matters pertaining to budgets and projects. The process in Wuxi can be divided into three stages.

Stage 1: This the stage of comprehensive consultation and is known as “projects recommended by the masses before the meeting.” Opinion and feedback is sought at all levels, making the most of community neighbourhood committees, residents’ groups, and residents themselves. Social media is also used to garner opinions and conduct surveys.

Stage 2: This is the decision stage and is known as “items decided by popular vote at the meeting.” The steps are as follows: a) selecting residents to participate in the meeting by drawing lots and selecting from previous representatives, with an emphasis on including common people and deputies of the local People’s Congress; b) calling a meeting, which begins with a detailed report, item by item, from the proposal developed in stage 1; c) extensive consultation, debate, and dialogue with people’s representatives, which includes explanations of any items the people do not understand or with which

² I draw this example from Shen Jianlin and Tan Shizan (2016).

they are dissatisfied; d) a vote is undertaken by the residents' representatives, with a focus on identifying priority expenditure items and those lower on the list of priorities..

Stage 3: The final stage is known as “follow-up supervision by the masses after the meeting,” and focuses on implementation. In this stage, project managers are required to keep the residents' committee informed about each stage of the project, with regular onsite inspections. After completion, public representatives and experts make an evaluation on the project, and local residents can also provide feedback on the project performance to the local government. These assessments form part of the process for developing a new project.

Dengzhou, Henan Province

Dengzhou is a small county-level city that has a focus on primary industries. By now, the items subject to democratic deliberation in Dengzhou concern much more than budgets.³ They run all the way from long-terms plans for rural construction to family planning and rural cooperative medical care. In these democratic activities, participants are elected in light of a reputation for honesty, fairness, and political consciousness. A quota applies, ensuring that representatives also come from new interest groups and emerging social organisations. Clearly, they are not “hand-picked” to give a prearranged result, and the approach is not tokenistic as one finds in Western systems in which bodies pretend to seek public opinion and then proceed as already decided. Instead, Chinese grassroots has substance and real representation.

Dengzhou's approach is known as the “4+2” approach, which entails “four meetings and two public announcements.” In more detail:

First meeting: the local CPC branch engages in wide consultation and detailed investigations to make preliminary proposals.

Second meeting: the village's “two committees” debate the CPC branch proposals.

Third meeting: all village CPC members meet to debate opinions from the village's “two committees,” and engage in further gathering of public opinion.

Fourth meeting: the villagers' representative meeting or villagers' resolution meeting discusses and votes on proposals from the previous gathering.

First public announcement: resolutions from the villagers' meeting are publicised for no less than seven days.

³ The example of Dengzhou is drawn from Bu Wanhong (2015).

Second public announcement: results of implementation of the decisions are announced to villagers in good time.

Wuxi and Dengzhou are merely two examples out of thousands upon thousands of such practices. Importantly, they do not take a one-size-fits-all approach, but use the well-tried targeted approach. By this I mean that each practice of grassroots democracy arises from local concerns and realities. Constant analysis and proposals for improvement lead to refining the methods and indeed – as with Dengzhou – expanding them. The growing experience also ensures that participants become familiar with the practice and can participate more effectively.

Socialist Democracy in Practice

I have been able to write only about electoral, consultative, and grassroots democracy in this piece, but I hope that it gives an insight into how extensive such practices are in China, and indeed how long a history lies behind them. To complete the picture, I would need to present material on rule of law (which has undergone significant further development in the last decade), socialist human rights (with a focus on socio-economic well-being), minority nationalities, and the way socialist democracy requires the leadership of the CPC and is indeed enhanced by such leadership.

But let me close by emphasising that socialist democracy in China is not seen as a given. They do not feel they have “arrived” at socialist democracy – unlike Western countries where their political systems have stagnated and are now atrophying. Instead, socialist democracy in China is a constant work in progress. Targeted practices, careful expansion, further education in socialist democracy, ensuring full representation from all groups, enhancing and encouraging participation – these and more are simply part of a constant process of reform and renewal.

Perhaps the reader can see now why I began with the observation – drawn from Chinese experts – that the latent superiority of socialist democracy is beginning to be realised in China. From my own observations on the ground, my sense is that socialist democracy has already achieved significant maturity. For my Chinese friends, colleagues, and comrades, it is still a work in progress.

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