Making Democracy Practicable in China:
The first Deliberative Polling® on Urban Governance in Shanghai

The article was originally written in Chinese by Han Fuguo¹, He Jing¹, and Yang Xu² and published in The Paper on June 10, 2015³. The English version was translated and edited by Kaiping Zhang⁴ to accommodate international readers.

Chinese scholars often fall into such extremes when they discuss developing democracy at the local levels of China. They either believe that it’s unnecessary to learn from the western countries because we already have the best democracy that we can have for this country. Or, they demand an all-in-one approach and insist that no democracy can be talked about without party competition and free election. Yet a critical middle ground has been omitted in the discussion — a “ladder” is needed to enable socialist democracy to come down to earth from the clouds.

This is also the key issue of the practice of democracy in China in the past 30 years of reform and opening-up. Is it possible to integrate top-level institutional design into common practices of local governments? And if so, how? How can deliberative democracy be put into practice in a way that differs from traditional forums and public hearings? These questions constitute the central concern for turning deliberative democracy from theory to practice in China.

However, many of the modern innovations in democratizing local governance might be short-lived without appropriate procedures, techniques, and methods. As a result,
these innovations are difficult to institutionalize. Without established structures, the public, though passionate about participating in public affairs, lose the chance to perform and gradually internalize democratic roles.

In China, many people simply treat deliberative democracy as equivalent to political consultation — people tend to fill in their own understandings of the concept. Some even exaggerate the function of deliberative democracy and think it should replace our current institutions — the electoral and supervisory roles of the People’s Congress — since everything can theoretically be discussed and solved. Yet this approach is, in fact, substituting democracy with deliberation. Other scholars, instead, reject the possibility of deliberation because they believe no equal deliberation can be achieved at all without competitive democracy. Regarding the role of deliberative democracy in China, we propose referring to the official document of the 18th Communist Party of China Congress where the statement on “local-level deliberative democracy in social governance” was initially made.

In response to the 2014 No.1 Research Program of Shanghai Municipal Party Committee, a Deliberative Poll was held at Puxing Sub-district in Pudong New District, Shanghai on May 31st, 2015. Advised by the Center for Comparative Urban Governance (CCUG) at Fudan University, the Deliberative Poll invited ordinary citizens to participate in selecting projects that receive “Neighborhood Committee Self-governance Fund”.

The preparation and implementation of this project — starting from training moderators, random sampling of residents, and ending with Deliberation Polling — spanned over 6 months. The project offers a vivid example of putting theories of deliberative democracy into practice in urban China.

A Brief History of Practicing Deliberative Polls in China

Deliberative Poll was initially introduced to Zeguo Township in Wenling City, Zhejiang Province in 2005 by James Fishkin, professor at Stanford University and member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and Baogang He, professor and now head of Public Policy and Global Affairs Program at Nanyang Technology University. Dr. Han Fuguo also participated in this project as part of the Zhejiang University team. The application of Deliberative Polling in participatory budgeting
transformed the traditional “heart-to-heart conversation” (minzhu kentan in Chinese), which lacks scientific standards, into a formal practice of deliberative democracy. Since then, the concept of deliberative democracy has been widely acknowledged and practiced in China, with the participatory budgeting in Yanjin County, Yunnan as another example.

In 2013, Gumei Sub-district in Minhang District, Shanghai, introduced Deliberative Poll to the inner-party democracy for the first time. The Poll was held among all party representatives of the Sub-district Party Committee. Later, another Deliberative Poll was conducted on a random sample of the Gulong neighborhood on its renovation project.

These early practices of deliberative democracy in Gumei Sub-district were exciting. Yet it should be noted that, the first one was conducted among party representatives instead of a random sample of all party members; the second one was held almost after the renovation plan was decided, and the results were not ultimately implemented due to the promotion of the head of the sub-district. Hence even though these early practices of deliberation produced positive impacts, still, they fell short of key elements of Deliberative Poll to some extent.

The Deliberative Poll on the distribution of residents’ self-governance funds at Puxing Sub-district is, by far, the very first deliberation project in urban areas of China that rigorously followed the procedures of Deliberative Poll. By bringing citizens into the deliberative decision-making process, it changes the history of leaders and experts making decisions on behalf of the people.

**What is Deliberative Polling®?**

The majority of the population is, oftentimes, “rationally ignorant” about politics, is what the well-known political economist Anthony Downs would call “rational ignorance”. The reason for this “rational ignorance” is that, as only one of millions of voters, the chances that one’s vote can influence election outcomes are probably small. Since the payoff is extremely low, why should one bother spending time to become informed of complex policy issues? Therefore, it seems rational for individuals to remain ignorant about politics since their votes probably don’t matter.
In this new mode of polling, participants have the chance to speak with a random sample of the population, which is usually a few hundreds people. They can further express ideas and discuss them with others in small groups. Therefore, it becomes possible for everyone to realize his or her voice matters. In the process of discussing with fellow citizens, people may change their initial attitudes. It was shown that participants demonstrated statistically significant attitude changes on 70% of all policy issues that were discussed in Deliberative Polls. It has also been consistently shown in over 20 countries over the world including China, that people are able to deliberate on their policy opinions when being provided with information.

Professor James Fishkin, director of the Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford University speaking at a seminar at the Center for Comparative Urban Governance, Fudan University. Lily Li (Right) was the simultaneous interpreter.

In short, Deliberative Polling is a method of consulting people on public affairs. By randomly selecting participants from the population and soliciting discussions on key policy issues, it serves as an effective way for the government to learn about people’s needs and promote innovative problem solving.
Based on the applications of Deliberative Polling in China, we summarize its key features as below:

1. Participants are selected through random sampling of the targeted population.
2. The number of participants is often larger than traditional forums and public hearings, so the large-scale event needs preparation and organization.
3. Materials of the policy issues to be discussed should be released to the public before the event.
4. It includes both small group discussion and plenary sessions.
5. There are two questionnaires that measure participants’ policy attitudes before and after the event.
6. Small group discussions are moderated by independent third-party.

Dr. Han Fuguo, Director of the Center for Comparative Urban Governance (CCUG), Fudan University and the Principal Investigator of the Puxing Deliberative Poll presenting this project at the Stanford University Annual Conference of Chinese Scholars.
As the very first Deliberative Polling that was rigorously conducted sub-district-wide in large cities like Shanghai, the occurrence of this project itself lends remarkable implications to the development of deliberative democracy in China.

**Establish Rigorous Deliberation Mechanisms**

Different from research programs that are usually led by researchers, we emphasized that the Puxing Deliberative Polling should first and foremost serve the role of setting up a direct dialogue between the sub-district government and residents. Researchers from Fudan University and Stanford University, as third parties, are only responsible for supplying technical support.

The project received tremendous support from officials of Puxing Sub-district: Supervised by Zhu Hongming, head of the Puxing Sub-district Party Committee, Dai Min, Director of the Civic Affairs Branch of Puxing Sub-district attended the first training session on deliberative democracy theories and organized the whole event. Yang Xu, head of the Pudong New District Social Organization and Service Center, also provided enormous help for this project.
The Crew of the Puxing Deliberative Polling

People tend to understand Deliberative Polling merely as a method of collecting public opinion. In fact, deliberation represents a typical form of public participation and polling measures and quantifies people’s opinions on the deliberated topic. The scientific feature of this method is demonstrated in its sampling method as well as repeated measurements on participants’ attitudes before and after deliberation. People’s policy attitude change through deliberation can offer key insights for decision-making.

The Puxing Deliberative Polling went through an enormous amount of preparation work before its final implementation on May 31st, 2015. The preparation phase included but was not limited to sampling participants from the whole population of the sub-district, training discussion moderators for small groups, door-to-door surveys to collect residents’ initial attitudes; distributing handbooks of project proposals, and retrieving completed initial questionnaires. All work was advised by Dr. Alice Siu, associate director of the Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford University and visiting researcher at the DCCUG at Fudan University, as well as Zhang Xianming, Dai Min and Dong Hua from the Puxing Sub-district, and Yang Xu from Pudong Social Organization and Service Center executed the work. Students from Fudan University including He Jing and Gong Yifei, and Stanford University including Kaiping Zhang and Kaiping Chen also provided invaluable help to the project.
Dr. Alice Siu and Dr. Han Fuguo training moderators at Fudan University

To participate in the competition of “Neighborhood Community Self-governance Funds”, each neighborhood committee first submitted project proposals to the sub-district government. All draft proposals went through a first-round review that was held by experts in civic affairs finance, social organization, and community management. Twenty-four proposals that met government policies in qualified writing standards were selected for deliberation from the initial screening\(^5\). Those proposals were compiled into a handbook and distributed to participants to learn before deliberation.

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\(^5\) The screening was completely determined by experts without collecting input from residents. It caused some doubt and dissatisfaction later during Deliberative Polling because some neighborhood had more than one proposal that entered the final deliberation phase, while some neighborhood did not have any proposals that were selected.
Moderators of discussion groups receiving the third-round training

Yang Xu (right), head of Pudong New District Social Organization and Service Center, preparing for the event.
Counting towards the Deliberation Day

On May 29th, two days before the event, the team prepared for logistics of the Deliberative Poll including confirming participants, making sign-in sheets and name tags, etc. Each participant was required to wear a nametag so that discussion members can know each other quickly.

Invitation Letter for Puxing Deliberative Polling

The venue was arranged at the Puxing Community Center for Cultural Activities. On the day before the event, an auditorium and six meeting rooms were prepared for the plenary session and discussion groups. The procedure and rules of Deliberative Polling were posted on the wall of the auditorium, and people from the same group had marked seating in the same area for the plenary session. Tables for 6 small meeting rooms were

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6 Three of the nine discussion groups shared rooms.
arranged in a circle or rectangle to facilitate discussion, and seats for a moderator and a note-taker for each group were also marked.

The staff preparing the auditorium for the upcoming deliberation day
The team preparing rooms for small group discussion

The Deliberation Day

Registration started at eight in the morning on May 31 (Sunday). Each participant first blindly drew a group number from a lottery box. Participants were thus randomly assigned to one of the nine discussion groups. Display boards introducing the twenty-four projects were exhibited in the hall for people to further learn about the topics that were about to be discussed. About one hundred and twenty people showed up for the deliberation day, more of them being elderly participants than young.

7 We noted that some participants tried to secretly swap groups in order to get into the group in which they have acquaintances. This, though only happened to one group, may have influenced the discussion in that group. However, we didn’t find extreme cases that a group was composed of participants all from the same neighborhood.
Registration on the deliberation day
Participants were reading the display boards and chatting with each other after checking in.

After the opening session, people started discussing project proposals in small groups. The twenty-four proposals were divided into a morning session and an afternoon session. Eleven proposals on community cultural services were on the agenda for the morning session. Discussions in some groups started from people advocating for or
questioning the absence of projects from one’s own neighborhood. Participants first searched for the projects that they found interesting and commented on the budget plans. Some of them then shared their arguments or personal experiences.

After a one-hour discussion in small groups, each group came up with one or two questions that they were most confused about regarding the project proposals. All participants then reconvened in the auditorium for a one-hour Q&A session. Questions were submitted to the expert panel and were responded to by the policy-making experts and the head of the relevant neighborhood committee. The plenary session solicited warm discussions, or even debates among participants, neighborhood committee heads, and policy experts. Dr. Zhang Xianming, who was on the advisory board of the event, had to remind the host to focus on answering questions rather than generating more discussion questions. Questions from small groups had considerable overlap: participants paid close attention to issues such as budget on volunteers. Many participants reported that they gained a deeper understanding of the projects through the plenary session.

The afternoon session proceeded in the same way, with a plenary session following small group discussions. The afternoon session focused on governance of neighborhoods: questions such as whether it should be the responsibility of the property management committee or the neighborhood committee to build door entrances came up in both group discussion and the plenary session. Discussions in some groups were so intense that participants started using Shanghai dialect. In the end, participants filled in questionnaires that reflected their updated project opinions in light of the event. Participants received umbrellas as a sign of appreciation for their attendance.

**Results**

Admittedly, deliberative democracy is not a panacea but a practical tool for solving complex social issues. Hence conflicting interests and attempts for mutual understanding persisted during deliberation.

Table 1 below shows participants’ attitude change before and after deliberating on selected projects. Participants rated their opinion on the twenty-four projects on scale

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8 Some group members were active, while some others were silently reading materials for most of the time. The eloquent ones seemed to have influenced the topics of discussion more than the others.
from 0 to 10, where 0 denoted “unimportant at all”, 10 denoted “extremely important”, and 5 denoted “exactly in the middle”. The table clearly shows that, compared to their initial judgments, people’s opinions regarding the twenty-four projects demonstrated significant changes, with the largest changes reaching 2 points out of 10.

He Jing, Gong Yifei, and Kaiping Zhang entering data for pre- and post- deliberation surveys.

9 Not all 24 projects were shown here because Puxing Sub-district hasn’t published the final decisions yet. Responses of “don’t knows” and missing data were excluded from the data analysis, as shown by the differences between N and the number of responses for each question.
We also found that people gained both internal and external political efficacy after participating in Deliberative Poll. As shown in Table 2, participants agreed more on statements such as “I have opinions that are worth listening to by the government”, and they agreed less about the statement “most public affairs are too complicated for ordinary people like me to be able to understand well.” In other words, participants became more confident about their capacity for participating in public decision-making and influencing the government. Furthermore, participants’ trust in the government increased after the polling, as indicated by their positive responses toward statements such as “government officials care about my opinions” and “government officials will consider my opinions carefully”.

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10 Dr. Yunxia Liu is an associate professor at Shangdong University and she is a visiting scholar at Biostatistics Department, Stanford University during academic year 2015-2016.

11 All political efficacy questions were on a 1 to 5 scale, where 1 means “strongly agree”, 5 means “strongly disagree”, and 3 means “exactly in the middle”.

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Table 1: Changes of average opinions toward 5 projects before and after deliberation. Dr. Han Fuguo and Dr. Liu Yunxia conducted the analyses.
Moreover, we found that people became better aware of others’ viewpoints after deliberation: the average response on the statement “other people don’t know as much as me” decreased from 6.36 to 6.08 on the 0 – 10 scale after discussion, where 10 denotes strongly agree. Meanwhile, people also became more certain about their own opinions after deliberation: the average response on the statement “others’ opinions are not as good as mine” increased from 5.96 to 6.17. Participants’ responses toward the statement “people only care about their own interest” increased from 4.49 to 4.9 after deliberation, yet the average responses were still close to the median, which suggested that participants were still trying to understand each other. These changes exactly manifested the essence of deliberation — sincerely listen to others while being heard at the same time.
Conclusion: A Practicable Democracy

It has been more than 40 years since China started exploring local-level democracy. Yet as the central government and the Shanghai NO. 1 Research Program indicated, an institutional breakthrough is urgently needed.

In exercising deliberative democracy at Puxing Sub-district, we found that the practicality of democracy depends upon a scientific approach to the procedures of public participation. Admittedly, there is room for improvement, for example elderly people were more passionate about the event, and more elderly participants actually showed up than the young participants because many of the proposed projects were about elderly people. Some neighborhoods also had more participants showing up than other neighborhoods. These issues may cause concerns for the representativeness of the decisions, and future work needs to address this sampling issue. Yet the development of urban and village-level social governance becomes possible only when democracy can be practiced.

Unlike behavioral experiments that can predict outcomes through manipulating conditions, one of the conundrums for political scientists is the difficulty of setting assumptions and control variables in the political world. The outcome involving conflicts between individual choices and the common good is, thereby, full of complexity and uncertainty. In Puxing Deliberative Polling, participants’ evaluations of the 24 neighborhood projects changed significantly after discussion with fellow citizens. Intense debates occurred between experts and residents, especially in the afternoon session when people became familiar with the projects. The essence of democracy — striving for mutual understanding in the presence of conflicts — was demonstrated well in the deliberation process. Only when information becomes publicly available and the rules of discussion are democratic can people fully explore all the possibilities involved in public decision making. In Deliberative Poll, people’s diverse opinions were converted to quantified opinions after deliberation.
On the contrary, the enthusiastic but uniformed mass support for policies we oftentimes encounter exactly reveal the deficiency of discussion. Therefore, only when public participation becomes possible, can we prevent the typical problem of governance – public decisions seemed to be well-received by the people until they are actually implemented.

It is important not to forget that the governance of cities involves a lot more than pursuing visible achievements such as building mansions. Urban governance should also aim for establishing a democratic environment, which allows its citizens to live with dignity. The development of democratic procedures and citizen participation should, thereby, be of the same importance as the planning of more and more constructions.

Shanghai shoulders the pioneering roles in experimenting with innovative forms of local governance in China. Looking forward, tremendous efforts are still needed to create a sustainable system of local governance that incorporates citizen participation, mechanisms for mutual-understanding, equal deliberation, and democratic decision-making borrowing existing political and cultural traditions. Although problems may arise in the process of experimentation, which will call for the continuous improvement of approaches, techniques, and methods, we can never advance without making the very first step.

The very first step that was made by Puxing Sub-district explored an approach that integrates the top-level institutional design into local governance. In sharing these insights, we hope to promote the practice of deliberative democracy in a broader scope in China.