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Deliberative polling experiment produces lively debate on local democracy

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A seminar on public hearing procedures, held in Beijing on July 1, also embraced discussion of recent experiments in ‘deliberative democracy,’ generating lively discussion among a score of social and political science scholars, researchers from leading Communist Party think tanks, and local Party officials.

After an opening address by a Ministry of Civil Affairs official in charge of rural elections, the seminar turned to discussion of the trend in China towards public hearings for some policy decisions. Public hearings (*tingzheng*) are encouraged by the 2000 Legislation Law to stimulate public participation in policy making and have become “faddish” – in the words of one scholar attending the seminar – among some government agencies. Strikingly, hearings are often used to justify price rises in some public services, and are often referred to sardonically as *zhangjia hui* (price hike meetings).

Some of the assembled experts called for hearings to be better institutionalised – by, for example, making them mandatory rather than merely recommended, and/or by making their findings binding, rather than merely advisory. Others argued for inclusion of a wider range of participants, for greater impartiality of the moderator, greater transparency, and for more information to be disseminated in advance of the hearings.

During the rest of the day, discussion turned to deliberative democracy and its experiments in Wenling Municipality of Zhejiang province. ‘Democratic deliberation meetings’ (*minzhu kentanhui*) began as early as 1999 in this county-level municipality. These meetings are held with varying degrees of regularity in different townships. Each meeting has a different theme. The objective is for officials to meet members of local communities and discuss problems that the local people raise. This mechanism was awarded a National Prize for Innovation and Excellence in Local Chinese Governance, conferred by the China Centre for Comparative Politics and Economics (CCCPE), a Beijing-based Communist Party

think-tank.

In one township, Zeguo, a more refined system was introduced in April 2005, with technical assistance from Professors James Fishkin of Stanford University and He Baogang of the University of Tasmania, who made presentations at the seminar. They used a ‘deliberative polling’ scheme devised by Fishkin. A total of 275 people were chosen to select a dozen infrastructure projects, from a shortlist of 30 provided by the local government, which could not afford to fund them all. The representatives were divided into sixteen teams to deliberate over the proposals, then each team elected one spokesperson to present the team’s opinion. After a second round of team and plenary discussions, all representatives were asked to individually rank the list of proposals. The resulting list was passed to the township People’s Congress for ratification.

He and Fishkin stressed the experiment’s flexibility in adapting hearing procedures, its active involvement of participants and the wider representation of the general public than hearings achieve. Officials from Wenling and Zeguo enthusiastically contrasted the eloquence of some of the chosen ‘deliberators’ – such as an illiterate and normally timid woman – with the typical ‘tepidness’ of local People’s Congress sessions.

The *Wenling minzhu kentanhui* have attracted widespread and positive Chinese media coverage (Ironically, having featured in Time magazine and the *New York Times*, Zeguo’s novelty is still in obscurity domestically.) Favourable coverage in official media is thought to have helped the *kentanhui* to survive over time, with the experiment enduring through two successive changes in the local administrative leadership. This has added to the confidence of the local advocates for the *kentanhui*, despite residual wariness of potential obstruction from higher levels.

The invited Chinese experts, many of whom are well-known scholars in public policy, were not easily satisfied. Some pointed out that 130,000 migrant workers in Zeguo (more than the local registered population) were excluded from the deliberative polling process, and so questioned whether the results really reflected the opinion of the whole community. Others noted that the cost of the process was not modest, and so questioned the sustainability of the process and its potential for scaling up. Some participants also cast doubt on the political accuracy of ‘polling’ as it may cause the “tyranny of the majority,” especially when there is a dominant clan (*zongzu*) or ethnic group in the area. The fiercest attack, echoed by many others, came from a specialist on the People’s Congress system, who argued that the experiment should be integrated into Chinese political system, in which the People’s Congress theoretically represents popular opinion.

Fishkin responded to these criticisms by saying that he has done ‘deliberative polling’ work at both regional and national levels in several countries, and thus that the mechanism does have potential for scaling up. But he appeared bemused by the criticism vis-à-vis the People’s Congress. “We actually strengthened the People’s Congress because we presented the results of the process to the People’s Congress for approval,” he said. But some participants felt that the Zeguo experiment was not sufficiently grounded in the China context and, moreover, added to the tendency for the Peoples

Congress to serve as a rubber stamp, rather than strengthening it.

Some participants argued that the local People's Congress is a 'special interest group' of people with power, influence and/or money (*youquan, youshi, youqian*). Acknowledging this charge, one official from Wenling Communist Party Publicity Department was remarkably direct: "We do indeed want to activate the People's Congress because it has collapsed, like a computer," he said.

Following the lead, the People's Congress expert who had led the earlier attack responded that it would have been better to replace the People's Congress deputies with the selected 'deliberators' rather than setting them up in a parallel universe. "Were you going to fire the People's Congress if they rejected the *kentan* proposals?" he asked rhetorically.

Despite these imponderables, Wenling cadres still felt that their *kentanhui* served better than public hearings as a model of public participation in decision making, because it gave members of the community the initiative in setting the agenda for discussion. Furthermore, they have incorporated the *kentanhui* into the performance evaluation of cadres, who are now expected to hold a certain number of *kentanhui* each year. The system, they say, is intended to create a "balance of power" between the local government and citizens.

Why would they want their power to be balanced? "Power means more trouble [*mafan*] and we have enough," said one cadre. However, both in the heat of public debate and in private conversations, officials from Wenling admitted they had encountered resistance from mid-ranking municipal cadres, and Zeguo officials said other township leaders had frowned on their experiment.

The four officials from Wenling and Zeguo who attended the seminar were acting in their capacity as Communist Party cadres and appeared not even to hold local government posts. Their interventions were exceptionally articulate and candid.

Also notable was the fact that several of the Chinese scholars did not shy away from talking about the practicability of institutionalizing democracy in China, whilst Professor Fishkin spoke exclusively in terms of public participation in decision making processes.

The seminar sponsors were the Unirule Institute, China-Review.com, the University of Tasmania and Deakin University in Australia, and the Stanford University in the USA. A previous meeting on deliberative democracy was held in Hangzhou in 2004 with funding from Ford Foundation.

Report by James Yang, Jul. 5, 2005

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