

## It's Their Call

Using a Stanford professor's polling technique, Chinese Communist Party officials are giving citizens a voice in decision making.

BY JOEL McCORMICK

ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAN CRONIN

**Last July in Beijing**, town and local-level party officials, academics, journalists and others—maybe 40 people in all—crowded into a small function room on the seventh floor of China Youth Daily's hotel, CY Journalists' Home. The building, part of the national newspaper's substantial headquarters along Dongzhimen Road, is a short cab ride from Tiananmen Square, where People's Liberation Army troops crushed China's pro-democracy movement in 1989. Given the event's billing as an "earnest democracy discussion meeting," a hotel owned by the Communist Youth League's media empire might have seemed an implausible venue. But democracy is discussed in all sorts of places these days. Institutions including the Communist Party are looking for ways to gain legitimacy with constituencies growing ever more impatient with corruption and decisions in which they have little or no say.



The meeting was a workshop on the public-hearing process and public involvement in budget decisions; it ran all day and informally into the next for some diehards. People came from all over—Palo Alto, Hobart in Tasmania, Hong Kong and different parts of Mainland China—but most importantly from Wenling, a coastal city of 1.5 million about 185 miles south of Shanghai in Zhejiang province.

Wenling is known locally for many things, including its big tidal power station. But for this group the city was important for another reason: one of its constituent townships, Zeguo, had recently taken the notion of public hearings a huge step forward, and some of the organizers involved were on hand.

The aim of the Zeguo experiment was to help townspeople reach informed opinions on how to spend the town's 40 million-yuan (\$5 million) public works budget. Officials first recruited 275 residents using random sampling to ensure accurate representation of the whole population. Then they split the 257 participants who showed up into small groups and, with the help of local schoolteachers trained as moderators, led them through hours of discussions on the pros and cons of 30 different infrastructure projects on the town's to-do list. At the end of the day the group—by then down to 230, but still statistically representative—selected 12 projects.

But what happened next really capped the experiment for everyone. The final project list, which called for new sewage treatment facilities, a park and other amenities but rejected plans for another town square and several road-building projects, was submitted to the local people's congress—and approved by 84 of its 92 deputies.

Public opinion had translated into official action.

The genesis of the Zeguo poll traces back to the work of two academics: Stanford professor James Fishkin and He Baogang, professor of international studies at Deakin University in Melbourne, Australia.

Fishkin, chair of the communication department and director of the center for deliberative democracy, came to Stanford in 2003 from the University of Texas-Austin with his wife, English professor and Mark Twain scholar Shelley Fisher Fishkin. In 1988, he developed a social science experiment since trademarked "Deliberative Polling," driven by a conviction that conventional opinion polls gather only superficial views based largely on headlines and sound bites.

By contrast, deliberative polling entails lengthy discussion of different sides of issues. The discussion typically takes place at a weekend conference, but Fishkin also has organized online deliberative polling. Everyone, in effect, deliberates. "It harks back to ancient Athens," Fishkin says, where small groups chosen by lot made important public decisions as part of everyday government operations.



**SPEAKING UP: Fishkin, attending the Zeguo experiment, observed growing exhilaration as people realized officials were seriously listening to them.**

Courtesy Jeffrey Prescott

Fishkin has run or assisted with more than 22 deliberative polls around the world—on issues ranging from whether Australia should abandon the monarchy and become a republic to the pros and cons of Denmark's adopting the euro. By polling participants both before and after they deliberate, he and his colleagues have shown time and again how people's views change significantly after they weigh all sides of a question. Deliberative polling events are often televised and background materials made available to the general public, to promote public education and involvement while furthering social science research.

Professor He opened the door to a trial in China. A native of Hangzhou, Zhejiang's provincial capital, who writes often about local governance in China, He was looking for a better way to plug people into decision making. He invited Fishkin to a November 2004 workshop in Hangzhou to explain his methods—and perhaps put them to work.

The question was, where? In the end, Jiang Zhaohua, the party secretary of Zeguo, put up his hand at the workshop. And on April 9, 2005, deliberative polling came to China.

Fishkin was there and took in the proceedings through simultaneous translation. "I sensed a feeling of exhilaration build over the course of the day as people realized that the party officials and local government were actually serious about listening to them," he says. Just how serious became evident when, at the end of the day, Jiang announced that he would recommend whatever the group decided to the people's congress.

Not only that, but party officials were so interested in establishing transparency with the poll that Fishkin says they improved his process. Generally, deliberative subgroups come up with questions to pose in plenary sessions and a moderator, often a journalist, vets all the submitted questions and picks a final list. “But in Zeguo, they were so taken with the idea of random sampling that they randomly chose a young woman participant and asked her to randomly choose the questions by reaching into a bin,” Fishkin explains.

Professor He, who chaired the Beijing workshop three months later, plainly has a lot of time for Zeguo’s Secretary Jiang. “Many officials don’t want to give up this power,” he says, recalling Jiang’s decision to go ahead with the experiment and to endorse the results. “In other cities nearby, officials still get money from the business sector [for ensuring decisions go the right way].” Indeed, there had been a bribery arrest when He visited Zhejiang earlier in the year.



Courtesy Jeffrey Prescott

President Hu Jintao came to power warning that if corruption weren’t wiped out, the Communist Party would be destroyed by it, and the issue has dominated chat-room postings in China since. In its ongoing effort to rein in corruption, Beijing requires local village and town governments to hold public hearings on bigger projects. So the Zeguo event wasn’t the first forum for public opinion, He points out. But, as workshop discussion made clear, other hearings fall short of deliberative exercises.

Fishkin expanded on that theme. “We heard this morning about some of the limitations of public hearings,” he said. “Some of those are, first, the issue is already decided—the public may have a say, but it is not listened to. Second, the people who participate in public hearings are often not representative [because they are selected by the organizers].” (In fact, 11.6 percent of those in the Zeguo poll were illiterate, about the same number assumed in the town’s population—but no less worthy of expressing an opinion for that, the pollsters argue.)

“Third, there are few occasions when people can speak; most just listen,” Fishkin added, calling that not participatory democracy, but audience democracy. “Fourth, there are no clear conclusions—they’re open to interpretation.”

Much of the meeting was devoted to discussing the mechanics of the Zeguo experiment and the potential for applying more scientific forms of polling in other towns and cities. Indeed, by the time the group broke for lunch, Fishkin had already declared the event miscast. “This isn’t just any old earnest democracy discussion meeting,” he roared with unconcealed pride. “This is an earnest *scientific* democracy discussion meeting.”

There was a hint of more than local-level interest in the Zeguo experiment. Yang Haikun, vice-chairman of the Administrative Law Society of China and a member of the influential Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference’s national committee, participated in the workshop and weighed in as discussion took different turns.

Outspoken on the subject of governance, Yang is often quoted in national media,

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usually urging deeper reforms to meet the public's expectation of "clean," streamlined government. "In my opinion China lacks legalized public hearing systems, which are necessary," Yang said in a later e-mail exchange.

But he added a note of caution. "Right now, public hearings—including Wenling's [Zeguo's] democratic deliberation—are applied to budget decisions. And they can also be applied to other decisions, but if we apply them to the performance of government officials or party representatives, then I think we should give it some time." Democracy, after all, was a learning process. "But in long run, no problem." Yang suggested such public hearings might be eventually applied beyond local-level decisions, to big municipalities, or even provincial or national issues, but again only gradually.

Mu Yifei, head of Wenling city's communications department, also thought sophisticated public hearings had potential beyond towns. "The Communist Party is now trying to democratize [itself] to promote democracy in the country," he wrote in an e-mail. "The party is introducing democratic systems through standing appointment of party representatives, polls for committees and pilot projects involving open direct elections."

And as the party goes, so goes the nation. "China is ruled by the Communist Party—without a democratic party, there will be no democracy in the country," Mu added.

And what did Zeguo Party Secretary Jiang make of it all? "The idea of Zeguo's democratic deliberation was to conduct a democratic and scientific experiment for important public decisions. The case on April 9 was another important move in understanding public opinion," he said by e-mail. "This was an exploration within the existing political framework of China—it marked a transformation of the decision-making process."

Ironically, while polling companies keep busy measuring where U.S. political parties stand in the public mind, Fishkin thinks his system neatly avoids party competition, which potentially makes it an easier sell in one-party states like China. As he wrote in a paper on the Zeguo experience, it "shows how governments without party competition or the conventional institutions of representative democracy as practiced in the West can nevertheless realize . . . two fundamental democratic values at the same time—political equality and deliberation."

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Indeed, deliberative polling could provide a much-needed safety valve to prevent projects from blowing up into battlegrounds because people have no say. "About 30 people were injured in August of last year when a land dispute in a village near Zhengzhou [in Henan province, inland] escalated into a violent clash with paramilitary police armed with teargas and shotguns," the *Taipei Times* reported in a story about heightened security measures announced in August. In that announcement, the public security ministry said 36 new antiriot brigades—composed of 500 troops, or 600 in larger centers—either were being deployed or already have been.

As Beijing itself acknowledges, social unrest is skyrocketing. Public Security Minister Zhou Yongkang reported recently that 3.8 million people participated in 74,000 protests in 2004, up from 10,000 protests a decade earlier. One energetic analyst crunched the numbers and concluded a demonstration threatening violence erupts every five minutes somewhere in China.

Tensions are increasing for a variety of reasons, from racial strife to mass unemployment brought on by the collapse of the state economy in the wake of market reforms—dispossessing millions of not only jobs, but the housing and basic medical and family care that went with them. So while disputes are inevitable in China's dog-eat-dog capitalist restructuring, tensions could be lessened, He argues, if the public had more of a say. "Projects are easier to implement if the people know they had a voice in the decision."

As other attendees had done, Yang, Mu and Jiang raised concerns over the cost of the Zeguo poll—100,000 yuan against a 40-million-yuan total public works budget, according to Fishkin—but they all agreed that if a deliberative poll was what it took to avoid costly mistakes, the money was well spent.



**POWER TO THE PEOPLE:** Fishkin took a cue from ancient Athens, where small groups chosen by lot made important public decisions.

Glenn Matsumura

Beijing-based Ford Foundation program officer Sarah Cook, who also attended July's workshop, sounded a less sanguine note after the meeting. "I would be very cautious about making any claims for the future of deliberative polling—it is an intensive and costly exercise," she said. "However, I do think that putting different forms of participation and accountability mechanisms out there for experimentation and discussion will enable the Chinese to find some of their own innovative ways forward, and may help to make the current processes of administrative or legislative hearings more representative or participatory."

Fishkin clearly sees cost as an issue, but not for China's comparatively wealthy coastal provinces. "Cost would only be an issue in the very poor parts of China that are undeveloped," he says. "There is so much opportunity in parts that are developing fast that I just think about how many opportunities there are in Zhejiang province alone."

Fishkin's research assistant Alice Siu attended the Beijing workshop and helped with the Zeguo poll, having worked in deliberative polling since Fishkin arrived at Stanford. She got her introduction to the field working on an online project, but for her the process really turned a corner in Zeguo.

The exercise in China "is the first time a government actually accepted the results of a deliberative poll," says Siu, '03, who is enrolled in Stanford's combination ma/phd program in communications. Now that Athenian democracy, or Fishkin's version of it, has been successfully road-tested in public policy making in Communist China, she wants to see if deliberative polling might be applied that way—in the United States.

Answering that question, in fact, is central to her doctoral research. "I'm pretty

much using the Chinese data as an example of what we could do locally in the States [so] I'm hoping to determine whether deliberation increases civic engagement and political interest and eventually effects policy changes," she says. Because Americans are familiar with town hall meetings and focus-group exercises, she believes there are ways to do that.

Maybe. Given widely held views that vested interests own both mainstream political parties these days—and that gerrymandering renders most congressional seats uncompetitive—it's possible that a system designed to deliver straight-up opinions on what the public wants could meet resistance. But proponents of Athenian democracy presumably can fall back on the People's Republic of China, assuming Beijing doesn't put the kibosh on more experiments. According to Fishkin, Zeguo has already committed to holding another poll, probably this spring, and this time the plan is to invite observers from cities across the country to watch deliberative polling in action.

In his concluding remarks, Fishkin called the Zeguo experiment scientific, democratic and legal: "The fact that we used random sampling and other aspects of social science made it scientific. The fact that the public, rather than party elites, was consulted obviously made it democratic. The fact that Mr. Jiang submitted the results to the people's congress made it legal."

Fishkin left Beijing feeling as bullish as his Chinese hosts looked earnest.

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