

**draft**  
**Public Consultation through Deliberation in China:  
the First Chinese Deliberative Poll<sup>1</sup>**

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**Introduction**

Throughout the world, policy makers who wish to consult the public appear to face a persistent dilemma. On the one hand, if they consult mass opinion directly, they will get views that are largely uninformed. Most citizens, most of the time, in most political systems, know little about the details of policy options or public policy. Even in systems with active electoral competition, each citizen can easily conclude that his or her individual opinion is unlikely to make much difference. Anthony Downs coined a term for this phenomenon, "rational ignorance" (Downs 1957). On the other hand, if policy makers do not attempt to consult the mass public directly, but leave it to policy elites and organized interests to speak for the people, those elites may have different interests. They may be out of touch with mass concerns. We seem to face a forced choice between politically equal but relatively incompetent masses and politically unequal but relatively more competent elites.

The dilemma is actually worse, in that most efforts to consult the public directly encounter difficulties over the issue of which members of the public are consulted: how are they selected? If one just invites the public to open town meetings, the appearance of mass participation may belie practices in which organized interests actually dominate. Organization is an unequally distributed resource and open forums can be captured through efforts at mobilization. On the other hand, if one conducts scientific polling via random sampling, then it is possible to get the views of a representative sample of the entire population. However, the views solicited will be uninformed or even non-attitudes (if for example, the public has not thought about a question at all, they may almost randomly pick an answer rather than admit that they "don't know.")

The research program we call Deliberative Polling is intended to respond to this dilemma. It achieves both political equality and deliberation at the same time. By employing random sampling of the mass public, it counts everyone's views equally. But by providing good conditions to effectively motivate ordinary citizens to become informed, it overcomes the problem of rational ignorance. Of course everything depends on what we might mean by "good conditions" and questions about the success or failure of this initiative turn on the empirical evidence about what actually happens when citizens deliberate.

Thus far, Deliberative Polling has been conducted mostly in established Western democracies ranging from the US, Britain and Canada, to Denmark and Australia. One Deliberative Poll has been conducted in Bulgaria and another is scheduled for the fall of 2005 in Hungary (for an overview see <http://cdd.stanford.edu>). While the range of countries and policy contexts has been expanding, there is one notable omission. There

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<sup>1</sup> Our thanks to Professor Robert C. Luskin for his extraordinarily useful advice on the questionnaire and many other aspects of this project.

has not yet been a case in which a government, rather than a private organization or a television network, has actually conducted the Deliberative Poll itself and then has gone on to implement its conclusions in actual policy. In the context of electric utilities regulation, a number of companies in Texas and elsewhere have conducted Deliberative Polls about how to provide electricity and those recommendations have been implemented. But those DPs were conducted by profit making private companies, not the government itself.<sup>2</sup>

The Deliberative Poll described here, in Zeguo Township, Wenling City, China, is the first to our knowledge that was conducted by the government itself and then actually implemented as a way of making public policy. We believe it is the first case in modern times of fully representative and deliberative participatory budgeting. It harks back to a form of democracy quite different from modern western style party competition – Ancient Athens. In Athens, deliberative microcosms chosen by lot would make important public decisions as part of the official operations of the government. But this solution to the dilemma of public consultation was lost in the dust of history. Random sampling was revived by opinion polling in the twentieth century (what is a random sample, at bottom, but a lottery?). But with opinion polls, the random samples do not deliberate and become more informed. Hence we think that the experiment described here is notable in the context of the long history of democratic reforms, in that it shows how governments, without party competition or the conventional institutions of representative democracy as practiced in the West, can nevertheless realize, to a high degree, two fundamental democratic values at the same time--political equality and deliberation. If the effort is successful, then local democratic efforts can thus achieve responsiveness to informed and thoughtful public opinion. There is a way out of the dilemma, a path suggestive of Ancient Athens, but one that has now surfaced in China--and in a way in which the Chinese case shows an advance over all previous efforts of public consultation.

## **Background**

In recent years consultative and deliberative institutions have been developing in China and an increasing number of public hearings have provided people with opportunities to express their opinions on a wide range of issues, such as the price of water and electricity, park entry fees, and the relocation of farmers, sites of historical interest, or even the famous Beijing zoo. In the middle and latter 1990s, some villages developed village representative meetings whereby major decisions on village affairs are discussed, debated and deliberated by village representatives. This local public hearing system has spread into urban residential communities. In the Shangcheng district of Hangzhou city, for example, a consensus conference or consultation meeting is held regularly once a month. Such a practice has also developed at the national level. In 1996, the first national law on administrative punishment introduced an article on holding public hearings before punishments were taken. The famous article 23 of the Law on

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<sup>2</sup> For more on the electric utility projects, see the section on renewable energy at <http://cdd.stanford.edu>. Another case in which DPs have been consequential can be found at <http://www.i-d-a.com.au>. In Australia, our Deliberative Polling partner, Issues Deliberation Australia, has conducted DPs that provided important input to constitutional reform efforts, but these projects were, once again conducted by a nonprofit organization and not by the government itself.

Price passed by the China's National Congress in December 1997 specified that the price of public goods must be decided through public hearing. This was followed by the Law on Legislature, passed in 2000, which required public hearings as an integral part of the decision-making of all legal regulations and laws. More than 50 cities have now held legislative public hearings. However, public hearings, despite offering some measure of public consultation, have inherent problems: they are vague in procedural requirements, easily subject to manipulation, have greatly unequal participation, offer insufficient time for deliberation, and lack scientific guarantees of representativeness or any means of producing clearly defined conclusions.<sup>3</sup>

Wenling City in particular is well-known for inaugurating deliberative meetings. It is a county-level city with a vibrant private economy. In some townships in Wenling, private tax contributions constitute more than 70 percent of the local budget. In 2004, it was awarded the national prize for Innovations and Excellence in Local Chinese Governance. From 1996 to 2000, more than 1190 deliberative and consultative meetings were held at village level, 190 at township level, 150 in governmental organizations, schools and the business sectors. Such meetings are called *kentan*, meaning 'sincere heart-to-heart discussion'.<sup>4</sup> Some meetings were 'one shot' discussions; that is, one session dealt with only one topic; others were continuing, for example, five deliberative meetings were held to deal with the relocation of the fishery industry. Still, some meetings were just consultative without connecting with decision-making directly and others were well connected to policy decision-making through the local people's congress.

While Wenling has achieved a great deal in developing such deliberative institutions, these efforts are far from representative, since they are based on self selected participation. And there remain other deficiencies. Deliberation takes place in a political system in which there are inherent dangers of elite manipulation of the public dialogue and mobilization of participants chosen by officials. The design of Deliberative Polling, with random sampling and balanced briefing materials, speaks to all of these difficulties in a transparent way.

The Deliberative Polling project in Zeguo Township, Wenling City allowed a scientific sample of ordinary citizens to deliberate about which infrastructure projects would be funded in the coming year. It is the first example of what we hope will be a broader research program applying Deliberative Polling in a Chinese context.

A Deliberative Poll could be evaluated in various ways. It is many things at once--a social science investigation, a public policy consultation, a contribution to the media and public discussion. In this case, we think that some reasonable desiderata are that: a) The sample is representative, b) There are significant changes in opinions, c) The sample becomes more informed, d) The views of this representative and informed sample be viewed as a credible input to policy.

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<sup>3</sup> In July 2005, we organized a workshop on the public hearing system in Beijing, China. Approximately sixty people attended to discuss the prospects of improving the public hearing system in China through Deliberative Polling.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed discussion on the motivations, functions, and different forms of these institutions, see Baogang He, "The Theory and Practice of Chinese Grassroots Governance: Five Models", *Japanese Journal of Political Science* (Cambridge University Press), vol. 4, no. 2, 2003, 293-314.

## Origin, Preparation and Sampling

### *Background on Zegou Township*

Zeguo town has an area of 63.12 square kilometers, the centre area is 6.5 square kilometers. It has jurisdiction over 97 villages. The permanent local population is 119,200, and the floating (migrant) population is 120,000. Zeguo's industry has been developing rapidly. Currently, the four major industries are shoe, water pump, air compressor and new building materials. In 2004 the total value of its industrial and agricultural output was RMB13.40 billion, with RMB13.18 billion alone being from industries. These four industries paid annual taxes of RMB 321 million in 2004, an increase of 33.7 percent compared to the previous year. The average annual net income of farmers is RMB 8,255. Zeguo town was recently listed as the 145th of the top 20,000 towns by their multiple development index at the national level. It was also placed number 30 of the top 100 with multiple strength towns of Zhejiang province.

It should be noted that the experiment was not imposed by outsiders. Both James Fishkin and Baogang He only provided technical advice.<sup>5</sup> It was the natural product of the political process in Zeguo town where the local government needed deliberative and consultative meetings to reduce conflicts of interest, reduce any perception of corruption in selecting priority projects, and provide a channel for citizens and interest groups to express their concerns. We believe these factors are replicable in other townships and cities in China where there are similar concerns.

### *Preparation and Sampling*

The launch of Deliberative Polling in Zeguo was undertaken by both a working committee and an expert committee formed in December 2004. The working committee included Deputy Party Secretary Dai Kangnian of Wenling, Officer Chen Yiming, Party Secretary Jiang Zhaohua of Zeguo, and Deputy Party Secretary Wang Xiaoyu of Zeguo, who took care of the logistics and acted as the sample's liaison. The working committee organized the expert committee that carried out a preliminary study of the development projects, and wrote the feasibility reports for all the projects. Briefing information about each project was prepared by the working committee and provided to the participants in March 2005. Professors James Fishkin and Baogang He helped local officials prepare the questionnaires and briefing materials and ensured these materials were balanced, accessible, and contained arguments for and against each project. Fishkin and He tested and revised the questionnaire through a number of interviews in March 2005.

Of the entire Zeguo township population, 275 people were randomly selected to participate in this Deliberative Poll. Random sampling of the population is designed to create a diverse and representative microcosm including not only those citizens who are already active but also those who are disengaged. Of the 275 people drawn in the initial sample, 269 completed the initial questionnaire. 257 participants showed up on the day of deliberations and 235 completed the experiment (completed a questionnaire both before

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<sup>5</sup> The project originated at an international conference on deliberative democracy in Hangzhou in November 2004, which was organized by Baogang He and Chen Shengyong. During this conference, James Fishkin and Baogang He discussed the proposed project with four Wenling officials. Later, Baogang He went to Wenling to make detailed arrangements for Deliberative Polling in December 2004.

and after deliberation.)<sup>6</sup> There are not many statistically significant differences between the participants and the whole sample from which they were drawn. (See Table 1 in Appendix) And what differences there are tend to be small. Given the high response rate of the initial sample and the high attendance rate from those who completed the questionnaire, the high degree of representativeness should not be surprising.

In one day, participants discussed how to spend the annual budget, examined their preferences among the projects, considered advantages and disadvantages of each project, and at the end of the day responded to the same questionnaire. Some of the projects included new bridges, roads, or a school, and city gardens. In total, the projects would cost RMB 136,920,000.00. Due to a change in government policy for the quota of land in 2005, only an estimated RMB 40,000,000.00 may be raised for urban planning, environmental and infrastructure construction. Thus, the local government had to prioritize their projects. The Zeguo town leadership adopted the Deliberative Polling technique to decide this difficult budget issue. In light of budget constraints, the participants were asked to carefully examine the 30 projects, discuss their merits and identify key questions that they wished to ask of competing experts in plenary sessions. As in other Deliberative Polls, the day alternated small group discussions and plenary sessions in which the questions from the small groups were answered from competing perspectives. At the end of the day, respondents completed a questionnaire about the thirty projects as well as information relevant to them.

This process provided a before and after comparison for the same sample. In March, the participants had completed a survey before any information was given to them and before they had an opportunity to deliberate. On the day of deliberation, the participants were given both information and a chance to deliberate, and then they completed the same questionnaire again.

To facilitate deliberation, the 257 participants were divided randomly into sixteen discussion groups, where each group had its own trained moderator. The sixteen moderators were teachers selected from Zeguo Number Two High School. They were trained by Fishkin and Baogang He in March and April.

## **Results of Deliberative Polling: Policy Evaluation**

The process of Deliberative Polling is intended to represent what the public would think if it had a chance to become more informed. The participants rated 30 projects on a 0 to 10 scale, where 0 is unimportant and 10 is important. After deliberation, these rankings changed significantly in many key cases. Among the highest rated projects, support increased significantly for three sewage treatment plants (projects ranked 1, 4 and 5 below), for producing a plan for the overall city design (ranked 2), one of the principal roads (the Wenchang Main Ave, ranked third) and the Citizen's Park (ranked sixth). Overall the top ten projects showed considerable concern for environmental issues (sewage), lifestyle (parks), and the economic development that would be stimulated by

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<sup>6</sup> Some of the 257 were not included in the analysis because they appeared to be cases in which one member of a household sent another family member or friend to participate instead. We were not able to catch all such cases at registration and hence a few had to be dropped from the sample after the event.

the Wenchang Main Ave project. Support for a number of other projects, including a number of roads and one park, went down significantly.

The two factors which participants cited as most important in evaluating the projects were “protecting the environment,” reaching a mean of 9.64 on a 0 to 10 scale, (where 0 is unimportant and 10 is very important), and economic development, reaching a mean of 9.08 on the same ten point scale.

**Table 2: Policy Changes**

No.	Rank of Projects – After	Before Mean	After Mean
1	35: Treatment of sewage, earlier stage	8.916	9.713*
2	30: Urban and countryside environmental projects (city plan)	8.642	9.239*
3	6: Wenchang Main Ave	8.253	9.238*
4	34: Danyan environmental project (sewage disposal)	7.531	9.145*
5	33: Muyu environmental project (sewage disposal)	7.269	8.866*
6	26: Citizen park (first stage)	6.963	7.440*
7	27: Urban environmental constructions	7.551	7.314
8	28: Danyan hill park	7.612	7.231
9	29: Muyu hill park	7.212	7.042
10	21: Auxiliary environmental construction for Muyu industrial zone; Lianshu industrial zone; Shuichang industrial zone	6.667	6.895
11	8: Bridge	7.423	6.531*
12	31: Demonstrative street	6.746	6.491
13	17: Xicheng Road (first stage)	6.259	6.296
14	12: Shuangchen Road (first gate)	6.973	6.118*
15	18: Zeguo main Ave (second stage)	5.827	5.972
16	23: Guojialing hill side reconstruction	5.604	5.953
17	15: Reconstruction for Donghe road	7.140	5.828*
18	32: old street reconstruction	6.369	5.577
19	7: First Stage of Muchang Main Road	6.530	5.543*
20	16: Donghe main Ave	5.633	5.327
21	22: Chengqu subroad rebuild	5.680	5.196
22	20: Air compressor industrial zone matching environmental constructions	5.629	5.062
23	10: Dongcheng Road (first gate)	5.433	5.100
24	9: Fuxin Road (east end)	5.781	5.052*
25	24: Wenchang park (first stage)	5.927	5.046*
26	14: Tngquao Road	5.023	4.733
27	11: Dongcheng Road (second stage)	5.606	4.586*
28	13: Shuangchen Road (second stage)	6.000	4.656*
29	19: Zeguo main Ave (third stage)	4.667	4.591
30	25: Wenchang park (second stage)	5.184	3.500*

Note: Means are from participants who completed pre and post questionnaires; \* = statistically significant changes

## Knowledge

In addition to their opinions on policy choices, the participants were asked questions about Zegou town and its economic situation to assess their knowledge of general issues. The four knowledge questions showed an average increase of 6.7 percent. The questions assessed knowledge of local policy by asking about the percentage of revenue increase, the size of the floating population, the major products produced in the town and the number of parks the township has now. One of the questions, which asked which product was not produced in Zeguo, seems to have confused respondents. If that question is excluded, the average increase in knowledge is 8.9%.

**Table 3: Knowledge Increases**

<b>Question No.</b>	<b>Before</b>	<b>After</b>	<b>Amount of Change</b>
43: By how much did Zeguo township's revenue increase from 2003 to 2004?*			
<i>Percent Correct</i>	20.8	29.0	+8.2
44: What is the figure for the floating population in Zeguo township?*			
<i>Percent Correct</i>	39.4	47.2	+7.8
45: Which of the below is not a major product of Zeguo township?			
<i>Percent Correct</i>	43.1	43.5	+ 0.4
46: At the moment, how many parks does Zeguo have?*			
<i>Percent Correct</i>	22.3	32.7	+10.4

Note: \*Indicates statistical significance. In analyzing knowledge questions, don't know responses and missing data are coded as "0".

### **Evaluation of the Process**

Mr. Jiang Zhaohua, Zeguo Town Party Secretary, expressed great enthusiasm for the process and the results as compared with all previous deliberative meetings. The methods are sophisticated and dealt with the most difficult issue of all, budgeting. He also admitted that: "Although I gave up some final decision-making power, we gain more power back because the process has increased the legitimacy for the choice of priority projects and created public transparency in the public policy decision-making process. Public policy is therefore more easily implemented." Mr. Ye Qiquan, the head of Zeguo town, who was opposed to the Deliberative Polling experiment at the beginning, realized the benefits of it. He identified three major changes among the participants: from a little to full understanding of the thirty projects; from passive to active citizens in the sense that they start to think how to save money to do more projects; and from a partisan to community perspective.

The participants greatly appreciated the process. When asked a series of questions on a 0 to 10 scale, where 0 indicated it was "generally a waste of time" and 10 that it was "extremely valuable," the participants gave the small group discussions an average rating of 8.46, the large group sessions with experts an average rating of 8.82, and the entire day of deliberation an average rating of 8.66. They also thought the process considered their

views very equally. On a 1 to 5 scale, where 1 is “very equal” and 5 is “very unequal”, the average answer for whether the “small group moderator provide[d] everyone with an equal opportunity for discussion” was 1.47 and for whether the group members were equal in the discussion, the average answer was 1.3 (1 is very equal). On whether their small group moderator attempted to influence the process with his or her own views, the participants’ responses averaged 3.93, where 4 meant that the moderator made no attempt to influence them with his/her personal views at all.

## **Discussion**

### *Indigenous Aspects of the Experiment*

The Chinese experiment combines Chinese indigenous deliberative methods with Deliberative Polling as developed by Fishkin and his colleagues (see <http://cdd.stanford.edu>). Local Chinese indigenous deliberative methods are characterized as follows: (1) the experiment drew on the traditional heart-to-heart talk form; even to the extent that the deliberative experiment was given a title with local flavor - it was called a “democratic heart-to-heart talk”. (2) The high level of participation was extremely impressive. Officials called for wide participation through official channels such as newspapers and notice boards, and provided a free bus, a free lunch and a token of 50 Yuan for each participant to attract more people to attend.<sup>7</sup> (3) In Chinese political culture, those who were randomly selected felt that they ought to participate in the deliberation in order to represent their villages. (4) Even the schedule of the deliberation reflected elements of a Chinese life-style in that the deliberation had a short morning session so that the participants could have their lunch at the traditional time of 11.30am.

### *Progress and Improvement*

Deliberative Polling represents an advance over the methods of previous public consultations in Wenling in the following ways. First, in the past, wide representation was thought to occur at town meetings if a variety of local elites, such as people’s deputies, village committee members, and village representatives were present. All were elected by local villagers and residents and would, therefore, appear to have a degree of electoral representation. The participants in these deliberative meetings, however, were either selected by governmental officials, or self-appointed with strong partisan interests. The representative nature of the participants was questionable and additionally, they might be viewed as subject to official manipulation. Deliberative Polling adopts random selection, overcoming perceptions of manipulation enabling representation for the whole community to occur on a scientific basis. In addition, random sampling insulates the process from possibilities of capture by mobilized groups. Party Sectary Jiang Zhaohua

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<sup>7</sup> One departure from Deliberative Polling as it has been practiced elsewhere is that while the Chinese randomly selected households, they allowed the households to select which adult member of the household would participate in the Deliberative Poll. This resulted in a significant under-representation of women, only 29.9 percent of the participant sample. We are recommending to our collaborators in Zeguo that they follow the process we have used elsewhere next time--random selection of households and random selection of the adult member of the household who participates.

commented that “the random selection method has a wide popular basis and is much more representative than the method we used before”. Because the sampling was random around nine percent of the sample was illiterate. In the past, illiterate people would not have been selected. They would have been automatically disqualified because, in the official opinion, “they even don’t know how to speak”. In Deliberative Polling, the illiterate participants were given the same opportunity to vividly express their views. One even criticized certain local policies harshly in a plenary session. Indeed, as Jiang Zhaohua acknowledged, an open democratic process enables them to be cultivated as modern citizens.

Second, past deliberative meetings did not provide sufficient information. Zegou’s 2005 Deliberative Poll had a team of twelve experts working on the briefing materials. Fishkin and He helped them revise the briefing materials, so that they were well-balanced and accessible, and clearly expressed pros and cons for each project. The experiment revealed that the absence or availability of information plays a role in changing people’s opinion. The briefing documents improved the participants’ knowledge of the thirty projects and thus assisted them in making informed choices.

Third, in the past officials often used anecdotal evidence to laud the achievements of deliberative meetings but they lacked scientific-based evidence. This Deliberative Poll required participants to complete the same questionnaire twice, once before deliberation and once after deliberation. By comparing the results, it generates a set of statistical figures about the impact of deliberation on the people’s preferences. This scientific method was felt by local officials to be valuable in making public policy. Jiang Zhaohua admitted that his personal choice of projects was based on what he thought “people” wanted, but that the people from whom he gleaned this impression were in fact close to local government. These projects were not on top of the list in the Deliberative Polling results. By contrast, the top 12 projects selected by the deliberative polling were strongly supported by empirical evidence about the representative and informed views of the community.

Fourth, in the past township consultative meetings would bring together 100-200 people for two hours leaving little time for adequate discussion and deliberation. This trade-off between the higher number of the participants and the lower quality of deliberation can be well addressed by Deliberative Polling. By alternating between small meetings and plenary sessions, this method allows the benefits of small group interaction to be spread over a large number of participants. At the same time, it allows for the information thought essential in the group meetings to be shared across the entire sample.

Fifth, in the past officials chaired deliberative meetings. During the Deliberative Poll experiment, school teachers were selected to be moderators. They were trained and advised to ensure an equal opportunity for discussion by each participant and to prevent domination of the discussions by a few. The experiment was intended to create a counterfactual environment in which the participants could interact in an atmosphere of significant equality and come to conclusions on the basis of good information. In the small groups, the participants had sufficient time to focus on the pros and cons of each project and to identify key concerns or questions that they then brought to the plenary sessions where they were posed to competing experts. Each participant was asked to fill the questionnaire privately without being subject to social pressure. Of course, it is not possible to completely insulate the process from all the inequalities of life. The

participants knew who many of their fellow citizens were. Some were more educated or prosperous or more forceful in the discussions. But the job of the moderator was to facilitate, so far as possible, an atmosphere of substantial equality and mutual respect for all points of view. The participant ratings mentioned earlier suggest that they were generally successful.

Six, related to point 5 is the empowerment of citizens. In the public hearing, for example, on the adjustment of price of transportation, ordinary citizens are powerless in the face of the agency of public transportation that has vested interests and expertise. Citizens can express their voice and deliberate the issue, but in the end, each public hearing on public price has become what people cynically call “a meeting of price-raising”. In the Zeguo experiment, most officials were sitting outside the classrooms and they were not allowed to speak out to influence the choices of ordinary citizen. In the end, the final choice of the sample of citizens was endorsed by Zeguo People’s Congress as an official policy. Citizens were empowered by the process of an open and transparent democratic mechanism; and the experiment contributed to a construction of social capital, a mutual trust between the local government and citizens.

### *Deliberatively Participatory Budgeting*

Budgeting has been the privilege of Chinese leaders who consult only with experts. Self-selection and official consultation predominate in budgeting decisions. To alter this Chinese tradition of a bureaucratic dominated budgeting process, the Zeguo experiment introduced deliberatively participatory budgeting.

Recently the Ministry of Finance has begun to develop a project of participatory budgeting. Hubei Province has made a few efforts at publicizing its budget. In rich towns like Zeguo, the rapid economic development has created a situation in which the revenue of the town government has depended upon the tax paid by the private sector, the social conflicts over diverse interests have been increased, the new rich and private sectors have demanded public consultation about the budget and its priorities. Under such pressure, the local government in Zeguo town developed deliberative and consultative budgeting mechanisms. The Zeguo experiment can be viewed as having been generated by local pressures rather than imposed from outside.

The concept of participatory budgeting has been well developed in other parts of the world, for example, in the city of Porto Alegre.<sup>8</sup> It does not, however, use anything approaching a Deliberative Polling method. The participants are either self-selected or mobilized by organized interests. The Zeguo experiment can be viewed as an effort at Deliberative Participatory Budgeting that satisfies the two fundamental criteria of political equality (via random sampling and equal consideration of opinions) and deliberation (via a balanced and informative process of discussion). Because its results have actually been implemented by local government, it offers a unique first case, and one that has prospects for replication in a Chinese context.

## **Conclusion**

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<sup>8</sup> W. R. Nylen, “Testing the Empowerment Thesis: The Participatory Budget in Belo Horizonte and Betim, Brazil”, *Comparative Politics*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2002.

The uniqueness of the Zeguo experiment was the close linkage between the results of a sample of citizens deliberating and the policy-making process. The results were presented to Zeguo local People's Congress on 30<sup>th</sup> April 2005 for further debate and deliberation. In the end, a majority of peoples' deputies voted for the Deliberative Polling's top 12 projects. The Zeguo town government has now implemented this decision. The Zeguo experiment represents a systematic public decision-making mechanism which consists of experts' studies of the feasibility of all projects, public participation through Deliberative Polling, government's consultation, and the final decision made by Zeguo's local People's Congress.

In light of the four desiderata mentioned at the outset, we believe this initial Chinese effort to be successful. First, a highly representative sample was recruited for participation on the day. Second, many of the opinion changes were statistically significant and showed a coherent movement, especially in favor of environmental concerns. Third, the participants became significantly more informed. Fourth, the results were obviously regarded as a credible basis for policy making--given the fact that they were implemented by the local People's Congress.

We believe this initial experiment offers real prospects for further democratic consultation in China. First, the procedures are clearly defined, easily learned and implemented. Hence, the process could be spread to other municipalities and to cities beyond township level. Some large cities in China, such as Hangzhou, have developed a public policy evaluation process involving more than 10,000 questionnaires being sent to urban residents. Such methods have high cost even though the quality of evaluation is low as urban residents do not have sufficient information about many of the government departments they are required to evaluate. Deliberative polling can overcome both these problems. A Deliberative Poll on the scale of the one conducted in Zeguo (say 250 participants) would be large enough to produce statistically significant results and could also represent the population's informed opinions. Compared to the large scale surveys now being conducted, it would be reasonable in cost. Indeed it becomes more cost effective for larger populations as there is no need for larger samples to represent larger populations.

Deliberative Polling techniques applied directly to public policy options seem to have a broad appeal as a form of democratic consultation that does not require party competition. Ogden has noted the importance of consultative and deliberative institutions for Chinese democratization.<sup>9</sup> China offers a significant opportunity to explore the possibilities for deliberative democracy about policy choices at the local level

In spreading Deliberative Polling techniques, however, there are several obstacles to be overcome. First, the cost is an issue for some venues. Zeguo spent around 100,000 Yuan and it is capable of affording this. But for the poor areas such an amount of money will be a big burden upon local people. In addition, the work load is heavy. Given the cost and workload, it is likely that Deliberative Polling techniques will be used only to deal with the most important issues such as budgeting for infrastructure, environmental issues and welfare.

Second, local practitioners are used to simplified and informal methods. For example, at the beginning of the Zeguo Deliberative Polling experiment, some local officials wanted to muddle through, skipping over some procedures and cutting short the

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<sup>9</sup> Suzanne Ogden, *Inklings of Democracy in China*, Harvard University Press, 2002, p. 257.

time of deliberation. They were surprised to learn that Fishkin and He insisted on a careful and conscientious approach to each detailed step in the process as it had been conducted elsewhere. Indeed, local practitioners need to be trained to understand how to apply this kind of methodology. At the same time, however, it is expected that local practitioners will find ways to localize Deliberative Polling techniques. It is imaginable that local practitioners will discover which elements of the procedure are indispensable, which can be omitted if permitted. Over time, they may adapt some procedures of Deliberative Polling to meet their local needs.

Third, an unequal power structure is a great hindrance to the spread of deliberative democracy. One way to deal with this hindrance is to focus on a set of procedures and methods. Deliberative Polling methods indeed carry with them some deep democratic values. Each element of the Deliberative Polling project is designed to ensure equality and fairness, reduce arbitrary intervention and influence. The process ensures transparency of decision, allowing a way to rebut suspicions of corruption. In addition, the neutrality of moderators ensures an equal opportunity for each participant. The random selection method implies a statistical equality for everyone in the community. The random selection process took two days to complete; ordinary villagers were surprised to learn of this very fair and corruption-free process. They commented on “how serious and fair the selection process is this time!” Moreover, those who were randomly selected felt it an honor to participate in the budget-related event. Of course, Deliberative Polling does not change the political structure. But it points to a method of achieving core democratic values (political equality and deliberation) without any need for western style party competition. And if the process spreads, it may have further effects on the political culture—effects that could facilitate additional democratic reforms over the long term. In short, the practice of deliberative methods and procedures may contribute to a culture in which people are accustomed to representative and informed public consultation. They may hopefully become accustomed to the notion that their voice will matter.

At the moment, the Beijing leadership fears the negative effect of competitive elections, and there are many restrictions imposed on direct town elections let alone national general elections. In this context, Deliberative Polling techniques offer a strategy of substantive democratization conceived as a reform of the public hearing system. Deliberative Polling fits with what the central government calls the “scientific, democratic and legal” decision-making or capacity of ruling—the use of random sampling and the quantitative study of opinion change are scientific, the public consultation process and the citizen’s choices are democratic, and the results of Deliberative Polling being submitted to the local people congress, as in Zeguo, provides a basis for legality.

By setting an example for Deliberative Participatory Budgeting at the local level, the Zeguo experiment offers a replicable path to realizing both political equality and deliberation in actual decisions at the local level. The experiment offers a precedent both for other efforts at participatory budgeting and for other efforts to achieve fundamental democratic values in substantive policy making without any need to realize party competition. Of course from the standpoint of a fully developed democratic system, party competition would be highly desirable. However, democratic reform at the local level in China can be usefully promoted, both in its culture and practice, through the application

and revival of this ancient form of democracy—deliberative decision making by a microcosm chosen by lottery.

**Appendix**  
**Table 1: Demographics of Sample**

<b>Question No</b>	<b>Entire Sample</b>	<b>Participants (%)</b>	<b>Non-Participants (%)</b>
<b>1: Gender</b>			
<i>Male</i>	70.1	66.2	80.8
<i>Female</i>	29.9	33.8	19.2
<b>2: Average Age*</b>			
	42.6 years	47.5 years	37.6 years
<b>3: Martial Status</b>			
<i>Married</i>	94.0	92.9	92.0
<i>Single</i>	6.0	5.7	8.0
<b>4: Education</b>			
<i>Illiterate</i>	10.3	11.6	0.0
<i>Primary School</i>	30.2	32.4	11.1
<i>Secondary</i>	35.1	35.2	33.3
<i>High School</i>	12.4	9.7	33.3
<i>College</i>	4.5	4.6	3.7
<i>College for professional training</i>	6.6	6.0	11.1
<i>University</i>	0.8	0.5	3.7
<i>Other</i>	0.0	0.0	0.0
<b>5: Occupation</b>			
<i>Farmer</i>	60.0	62.8	21.7
<i>Worker</i>	3.9	3.7	4.3
<i>Entrepreneur (business owner)</i>	21.0	16.5	52.2
<i>Merchant</i>	8.3	7.4	13.0
<i>Teacher</i>	2.0	1.6	4.3
<i>Public Servant</i>	1.5	1.6	4.3
<i>Other</i>	3.4	3.7	0.0

Note: \* = Significant difference between participants who completed before and after surveys and participants who completed before surveys; Age  $t(23) = -1.73, p = .097$