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## Dabbling in Democracy

No one knew what to expect when a Chinese town tried listening to its people

BY SUSAN JAKES | ZEGUO

On the morning of April 9, at 8:30 sharp, 257 residents of Zeguo township converged on a schoolhouse to decide the future of their community. According to the rules of the event, they had been randomly selected to represent a microcosm of their town of 240,000, which lies in a prosperous manufacturing area in China's Zhejiang province. Each had completed a questionnaire on local affairs as well as a poll in which they rated the desirability of 30 government-proposed infrastructure projects. Some giggled as they pinned on pink badges labeling them "popular-will representatives." But most fell silent when they entered the school's auditorium. No one knew what to expect. Or exactly what was meant by the characters on the banner over the podium, which read: "Zeguo's 2005 Selecting a Development Plan, Democratic Earnest Discussion."



This was not Chinese politics as usual. For the next eight hours these citizens grilled local officials, learned about their town's budget, debated various proposals for bridges, roads, parks and sewage-treatment plants, and then voted (through a second, identical questionnaire) on which 10 to build. Usually, such decisions are reserved for Communist Party officials conferring behind closed doors. But cadres in Zeguo and its parent city, Wenling, have pioneered a more participatory approach, putting them at the vanguard of China's experiments in political reform. President Hu Jintao has vowed never to adopt "Western-style" democracy. "But events like Zeguo's referendum, though isolated, may someday form the basis for

China's gradual political liberalization," says He Baogang, an expert on Chinese grassroots democracy at the University of Tasmania who was on hand to observe the proceedings.

Paradoxically, Wenling's "democratic discussions" emerged as an attempt by officials to bolster the Party's authority. In 1999 a political education campaign was under way, but leaders couldn't get locals to show up. So they changed tack, offering "dialogues" in which residents could exchange ideas with their leaders, instead of being lectured as usual. "We propaganda officials aren't in the democracy business," says Mu Yifei, deputy director of Wenling's Publicity Bureau, "but slowly this idea caught on. The people and the leaders started to value each other's input."

Still, Zeguo's forum is novel even by Wenling's standards. Its format;½from the way participants are selected to the way questionnaires are worded;½adheres closely to the rules of the "Deliberative Poll," an approach to public consultation devised by James Fishkin, a professor at Stanford University. Fishkin originally developed his poll to measure and promote informed public opinion in the U.S., but he is in Zeguo at the behest of its Communist Party secretary, Jiang Zhaohua. The two met at a conference in Hangzhou in November and struck a deal in which Fishkin could test his model's applicability to China and Jiang could get what he describes as a "scientific reading" of Zeguo's preferences. In the school auditorium Fishkin tells the crowd, "This experiment is designed so your voice matters; it builds on a kind of democracy that goes all the way back to Athens."

What could induce a local Communist leader to try out the democratic tools of ancient Greece or contemporary America? Jiang, 42, who unusually for a man in his position has a degree in philosophy, says the reasons are practical, not ideological. Zeguo's redesign requires more construction than his budget will cover. By inviting the public to choose which projects should come first, Jiang says, he avoids not only "the headache of having to guess what the people want," but also the perception that he might have chosen particular projects because of kickbacks. What's more, overhauls like these often spark social instability, with angry locals objecting to the relocation of their homes or the confiscation of their farms. A day after Zeguo's debate, thousands of citizens in Huaxi, 100 km away, rioted over chemical plants they claim are polluting the town. "That kind of thing doesn't happen in Zeguo," says Hu Guanghui, a schoolteacher who attended the April 9 meeting. "Here the people and the leaders don't feel so far away from each other."

In the morning debate, questions directed at town leaders relate to the interests of individual neighborhoods. By the afternoon, talk focuses on the good of the town. When the votes come in at day's end, environmental projects have risen to the top of the list, while flashier "prestige projects," including a park and some bridges, have dropped to the bottom. Fishkin is elated. "The public is smart," he says. "Under the right conditions, it's smart in China just like it's smart in Britain or smart in Bulgaria."

So far, none of Zeguo's Communist leaders seem worried that this forum might set a dangerous precedent. Jiang, who will present the meeting's data to the local People's Congress, says he also wants to train local cadres in data analysis so that he can hold more polls. For now at least, some democracy is useful; even in a one-party town.

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