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China: An International Journal, Volume 12, Number 3, December 2014, pp. 94-114 (Article)

Published by NUS Press Pte Ltd
DOI: 10.1353/chn.2014.0028



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Discourses on Chinese-Style Democracy in China

NGEOW Chow Bing

This article reviews a book series on Chinese-style democracy that was published in China in 2010 and represents mainstream Chinese perspectives and discourse on Chinese-style democracy. It begins with a discussion of whether a viable alternative to the liberal democratic model exists, and whether we should seriously consider Chinese-style democracy as one such alternative. The article discusses each of the volumes in this series, evaluates the arguments contained within them, and then reviews another two books in English that critique Chinese-style democracy. Finally, it concludes by arguing that we should take Chinese discourse about Chinese-style democracy seriously, not because we have to agree that it presents a viable alternative, but because it provides a realistic strategy for political progress within China's political system.

THE REVIEWED BOOKS

Gao Jian and Tong Dezhi, eds., *Zhongguoshi minzhu (Chinese-Style Democracy)*, Book Series on Chinese-Style Democracy vol. 1 (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 2010).

Gao Jian and Tong Dezhi, eds., *Fazhi minzhu (Constitutional Democracy)*, Book Series on Chinese-Style Democracy vol. 2 (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 2010).

Gao Jian and Tong Dezhi, eds., *Dangnei minzhu (Intra-Party Democracy)*, Book Series on Chinese-Style Democracy vol. 3 (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 2010).

Gao Jian and Tong Dezhi, eds., *Jiceng minzhu (Grassroots Democracy)*, Book Series on Chinese-Style Democracy vol. 4 (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 2010).

Gao Jian and Tong Dezhi, eds., *Xieshang minzhu (Deliberative Democracy)*, Book Series on Chinese-Style Democracy vol. 5 (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 2010).

Kerry Brown, *Ballot Box China: Grassroots Democracy in the Final Major One-Party State* (London: Zed Books, 2011).

Yuan Zijun, *The Failure of China's "Democratic" Reforms* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012).

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“Democracy, law, freedom, human rights, equality and fraternity are not characteristics unique to capitalism. They are the shared fruits of civilization that have come into being in the history of the whole world and are among the values that mankind has collectively pursued”.¹ Notwithstanding the universalistic language that Wen Jiabao has used in his many pro-reform speeches, he has been careful to remind his audience that the goal of political reform is to realise “socialist democracy”. Of course, Wen could never have publicly advocated “Western” liberal democracy. Instead, he promoted the model of “socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics” that the Communist Party of China (CPC) consistently puts forth as the form of democracy most suitable to China.

DEMOCRACY: UNIVERSAL OR DIFFERENT?

“Democracy” is a term that has been misappropriated to mask certain truly undemocratic systems. Arguments for a “different” form of democracy are nothing new, either. From Sukarno’s “guided democracy” and Nyerere’s “one-party democratic socialism”, to the democracy conditioned by “Asian values” and more recently “sovereign democracy” in Russia, the meaning of “democracy” has been stretched differently to justify authoritarian rule. For some political scientists, this “conceptual stretching” renders the term meaningless. “Conceptual housecleaning” work is therefore needed to get rid of the modifying adjectives such as “people” or “sovereign” that distort the meaning of democracy and create a more or less universal understanding of the term. Is “socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics” just another attempt to prolong and justify authoritarian rule rather than to provide a *genuine democratic alternative* to the liberal democratic model? For many political scientists, the answer is clear: either “you have it or you don’t”; not “you and I have different versions of it”. Democracy in ancient Greece might have taken a different form, but in modern days, liberal democracy, based on electoral and representative institutions and guaranteed by full protection of civil and political liberties together with the rule of law and judicial independence, is the best and only model.

However, some scholars are less attuned to this universalism of liberal democracy. Among the China specialists, Suzanne Ogden contends that concepts such as democracy, justice and freedom need to be contextualised. Judged by China’s own standards and compared to her own past, China is gradually becoming more democratic and the Chinese people have gained many rights they previously lacked; however, China’s leaders are determined not to be hostage to standards and values about democracy created by Western liberal democracies.² Brantly Womack contemplates the “theoretical possibility of a party-state democracy” in China, arguing that although liberal democracy has been popular and effective for a long time, it neither expresses the will of the

¹ Wen Jiabao in a 2005 press conference, cited in Yang Dali, “China’s Long March to Freedom”, *Journal of Democracy* 18, no. 3 (July 2007): 61.

² Suzanne Ogden, *Inklings of Democracy in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2002).

people nor produces the best leadership. A broader conceptualisation of democracy will allow the inclusion of a Chinese-style democratic system. Democratic consensus, which includes benefits to the people, majority rule, and protection of minority rights and interest, could theoretically exist under the CPC leadership. A Chinese path of Party-state democratisation is hence theoretically possible.³

Stephen Angle examines the argument that the communist tradition of “democratic centralism” could become a coherent and defensible alternative to liberal democracy. Democratic centralism is premised on mass participation and articulation of interests on an equal basis at the “input” stage of policy-making. As an “input” democracy, it is not necessarily weaker than the citizens’ control of policies through the election of parties and politicians as in liberal-democratic systems. Although the “centralism” part in democratic centralism is more problematic, it does not necessarily rule out public criticism and dissent. Properly reformed and institutionalised, democratic centralism could fulfil Rawls’s standard of a “decent” regime and China’s own standard of legitimacy.⁴ Most recently, popular futurology writer John Naisbitt contends that the absence of immediate electoral pressure allows the elite leadership in Chinese-style “vertical democracy” to plan for the long-term interests of society, even while it allows for input from society’s bottom ranks.⁵

In 2005, China issued its white paper on the “Building of Political Democracy in China”. The paper asserted that the leadership of the ruling CPC is indispensable to realising the goal of its people becoming masters over their own country. It is an essential part of the eight elements that comprise the official version of Chinese democracy, which are: (1) the people’s congress system; (2) the system of ethnic autonomous regions; (3) multi-party cooperation and political consultation between political parties and social organisations under the leadership of the CPC; (4) grassroots democracy practised in villages, communities and state-owned work units; (5) intra-Party democracy; (6) respect for human rights (in particular social and economic rights); (7) governmental democracy (administration based on laws and a policy-making process that reflects public opinions through mechanisms such as hearings); and (8) judicial democracy (accountability of judicial organs and prosecutors to the people’s congresses).⁶

Some scholars will likely dismiss such democracy as pure fiction and propaganda. For example, He Baogang dismisses the official model of paternalistic democracy as formalistic democracy meant to “justify paternalistic power rather than as a means

³ Brantly Womack, “Democracy and the Governing Party: A Theoretical Perspective”, in *Political Civilization and Modernization in China*, ed. Zhong Yang and Hua Shiping (Singapore: World Scientific, 2005), pp. 121–47.

⁴ Stephen C. Angle, “Decent Democratic Centralism”, *Political Theory* 33, no. 4 (August 2005): 518–46.

⁵ John Naisbitt and Doris Naisbitt, *China’s Megatrends: The 8 Pillars of a New Society* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Books, 2010).

⁶ Winberg Chai, “China’s 2005 White Paper: Building of Political Democracy in China”, *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 33, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 3–36.

of public control over the government”.⁷ Bo Zhiyue also believes that the argument for Chinese-style democracy is not well grounded. Although he acknowledges that the present Chinese regime enjoys a fair degree of legitimacy in the eyes of the Chinese people, “this does not mean that this legitimate government is the outcome of a democratic process”.⁸

Should we then take seriously the mainstream discourses on Chinese-style democracy generated in China? This article agrees with Li Cheng when he writes, “[i]f western scholars hope to assess the prospects of democratization in China, they obviously need to understand the Chinese view of democracy, as well as the political agenda of Chinese leaders. Otherwise it may be well-nigh impossible to grasp the implications of specific political developments, or to distinguish between universal components of democratic systems and unique Chinese innovations”.⁹ We should take seriously these discourses and engage them. To this end, this article reviews a Chinese book series and two other English-language books that provide contrasting perspectives on “socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics”.

THE BOOK SERIES ON CHINESE-STYLE DEMOCRACY

Gao Jian and Tong Dezhi, the editors of the book series, are young scholars in China. Both hold positions at Tianjin Normal University and studied under Professor Xu Datong, China’s foremost expert on Western political theory. Tong translated two books by Robert Dahl. Both Gao and Tong are participants in the “Project on Marxist Theoretical Research and Construction” and oversee the sub-project on theoretical research in Chinese democratic politics. According to the postscript to the book series, they reviewed more than 30,000 articles on democracy published in Chinese academic journals or newspapers, and selected about 100 articles that are judged representative of Chinese scholarly views for publication in the five books of this series devoted to Chinese-style democracy. This series does not include excerpts from monographs or chapters from edited volumes, and therefore it excludes a significant amount of important writing on the subject. However, academic journals and newspapers do form an important platform for discourse in China, and in this sense, the series constitutes an important source for understanding China’s scholarly views on Chinese-style democracy.

Chinese-Style Democracy (Zhongguoshi minzhu)

The book series begins with the main book, entitled simply *Chinese-Style Democracy*. According to Tong Dezhi, Chinese-style democracy is buttressed by two classes of

⁷ He Baogang, *The Democratization of China* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1996).

⁸ Bo Zhiyue, “China’s Model of Democracy”, *International Journal of China Studies* 1, no. 1 (January 2010): 115.

⁹ Li Cheng, “Introduction: Assessing China’s Political Development”, in *China’s Changing Political Landscape: Prospects for Democracy*, ed. Li Cheng (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution Press, 2008), p. 7.

democratic elements: subjective elements and objective elements. Subjective elements of a democracy involve the relationship between political subjects, including citizens, governments (central, local and departmental), political parties and social organisations (including non-governmental organisations [NGOs], communities, etc.). Interactions between and within these elements constitute the subjective aspect of a democratic system. In China, the People's Congress, intra-Party democracy and grassroots democracy are the constituent elements that form the subjective aspect of Chinese-style democracy. The objective elements refer to the desirable objective conditions that would sustain and consolidate democratic politics, such as economic, cultural and historical features. The current build-up of rule of law in China is thus interpreted here as an objective element that will provide the country's subjective elements with a favourable environment (e.g. stable constitutionalism). Other objective elements include the market economy, which gives rise to rights consciousness, and civic culture, which helps to foster a positive and rational citizenry.¹⁰

The earliest influential article expressing such a view was an essay written by Wang Huning in 1987, now a member of the CPC's politburo and the director of CPC's central policy research office. Wang analyses the "ecological" (the "objective") conditions of "socialist democracy" in China. He sees Robert Dahl's "polyarchy" formulation as highly ideal and abstract, the full realisation of which requires the support of a complex "ecological" system. "Democratic politics cannot go beyond the concrete conditions within a specific socio-economic environment," Wang argues. "... on the other hand, democratic politics cannot also escape from adapting to the changes in socio-economic conditions".¹¹

The democratisation of China henceforth involves a multi-front strategy for improving the subjective and objective elements within the existing system. Chinese scholars frequently use the term "democratisation" to describe political reforms in China, which clearly indicates their acknowledgement that China's present political system suffers from a deficit of democracy. However, "democratisation" in such forms of discourse does not mean the replacement of an authoritarian regime by a democratic regime. Instead, it means the discovery and development of potentially democratic elements, features and institutions within the existing system.¹² Here, Chinese scholars

¹⁰ Tong Dezhi, "Zhongguoshi minzhu: yaosu, zhanlüe yu jiegou" (Chinese-Style Democracy: Elements, Strategy and Structure), in *Chinese-Style Democracy*, pp. 3–31.

¹¹ Wang Huning, "Shehuizhuyi minzhu zhengzhi fazhan de shengtai fenxi" (An Ecological Analysis of the Development of Socialist Democratic Politics), in *Chinese-Style Democracy*, p. 140.

¹² This is similar to the observation made by Zheng Yongnian and Lye Liang Fook, in which they argued that "democratisation" refers to "the process of introducing democratic elements or features to an existing political system which is widely regarded as authoritarian". See Zheng Yongnian and Lye Liang Fook, "Is Democratization Compatible with China's One-Party System?", in *Political Parties, Party Systems and Democratization in East Asia*, ed. Lye Liang Fook and Wilhelm Hofmeister (Singapore: World Scientific, 2011), p. 18. This line of thought is actually quite similar to the democratic thinking of establishment intellectuals like Yan Jiaqi who became dissidents after 1989. See Chiou C.L., *Democratizing Oriental Despotism* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1995).

differentiate what they call the “state body” (*guoti*) from the “political body” (*zhengti*). The “state body” attests to the class nature of the state (capitalist or socialist), while “political body” indicates its governmental form. While the socialist nature of the state is unchangeable, it is possible to democratise the “political body” as a part of legitimate reform. The underlying assumption here maintains that the fundamentals of the political system are sound; they just need to be nurtured to grow and become more democratic. Hence, unlike economic reforms, which represent a drastic transformation from central planning to “socialist market economy”, reforms of the political system represent something more along the lines of “adjustments”.

On the other hand, such “democratisation” will not develop beyond the existing stages of socio-economic development. An ecological analysis of democratisation in China therefore will look at the development of each aspect (political, cultural and social) in tandem with all others. An adverse attitude towards radical democratisation underlies this developmental approach to democratisation, along with sensitivity to the problem of order. Significantly, “orderly democratization” is the title of another article. Indeed, the CPC’s continuous leadership role is sometimes justified on the pragmatic grounds that it is the only stabilising force in the modernisation process rather than the dogmatic grounds of “vanguard of the proletariat” or “three represents” associated with the Party and its past.¹³

Reading these articles, one might take note of the assumptions these Chinese scholars share with modernisation theory. Indeed some can even be said to be somewhat “Huntingtonian”. Samuel Huntington did not approach modernisation and development with the optimistic, stage-by-stage trajectory projected by Walt Rostow; instead, he adopted the strikingly cautious and conservative attitude embodied in *Political Order in Changing Societies*.¹⁴ Modernisation is indeed full of dangers and instabilities. Hence, the immediate task of political reform is not always the implementation of institutions of universal democracy such as elections or free speech, but rather institutions that fit society’s pattern of development. For Kang Xiaoguang, China’s leadership must presently uphold social justice and construct a “welfare” society to increase the Party’s legitimacy as its immediate task.¹⁵ For Wang Shaoguang and his co-authors, the present task calls for a build-up of the state’s governance capacities.¹⁶ These authors come together in their emphasis on good governance over democracy.

¹³ Lin Shangli, “Youxu minzhuhua: lun zhengdang zai Zhongguo zhengzhi fazhan zhong de zhongyao zuoyong” (Orderly Democratisation: On the Important Function of the Political Party in China’s Political Development), in *Chinese-Style Democracy*, pp. 249–62.

¹⁴ Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968).

¹⁵ Kang Xiaoguang, “Jingji zengzhang, shehui gongzheng, minzhu fazhi yu hefaxing jichu” (Economic Growth, Social Justice, Democracy, the Rule of Law and Basis of Legitimacy), in *Chinese-Style Democracy*, pp. 171–86.

¹⁶ Wang Shaoguang et al., “Di’erdai gaige kaifang zhanlüe: jiji tuijin guojia zhidu jianshe” (Second-Generation Reform Strategy: Improving the State’s Institutional Building), in *Chinese-Style Democracy*, pp. 210–20.

On the other hand, other scholars hold views that are more attuned to liberal democracy. Yan Jirong argues that China should fully embrace the “third wave” of democratisation, actively experiment in government innovation, expand the room of political development and construct a political system that is responsive to public opinion. More boldly, he asserts that democracy as a type of government transcends cultural parochialism and is fully “transferable”. What democracy is concerned with is not just “who rules” but “how to exercise power”. In this sense, democracies differ only by degree, but not in substance, as exists between “bourgeois” and “proletarian” forms, for example. According to this perspective, village democracy shows that China is moving on a correct path. The principal task at the moment is to install constitutionalism, or more concretely, a limited government that exercises power constitutionally and in a restrained manner.¹⁷

In principle, Chinese-style democracy does not refute the importance of elections. As Huang Weiping argues, there is a process of expanding and deepening the practice of electoral democracy throughout China. Competitive elections, originally implemented only at the village level, have since expanded to include elections for urban residents’ committees, town/township mayors, secretaries of grassroots party organisations, and base-level representatives of the People’s Congress. In his article, Huang concludes that since the beginning of the reform era, elections in China have progressively become more democratic. He cites two reasons for this. The first is the reasoning familiar to modernisation theory that social changes brought from economic growth increase people’s demands for democratic rights and participation. Second, Huang praises the Chinese leadership for its ability to increasingly identify with the “universal values of common human political civilization”.¹⁸

He Zengke describes the goal structure of China’s democratic development as “one core, multiple lines” (*jiyuan duoxian*). The “core” refers to the progression towards political democracy, and “multiple lines” refer to the democratic developments such as elections, deliberative democracy and liberal institutions. The following passage by He is worth quoting:

Concretely speaking, electoral democracy, characterised by free, fair, and competitive elections, is the foundation of democratic politics. Based on the consolidation and improvement of village elections, electoral democracy should be expanded, level-by-level, from bottom to top. Electoral democracy can also be integrated with intra-Party democracy. From promoting intra-Party elections at the grassroots level, effective integration between intra-Party democracy and people’s democracy can be further explored. Deliberative democracy is an important form of democratic politics. It should be practised by local governments in which electoral democracy has not reached, such as city-level governments, and expands from here to both to the top and the bottom. In facing difficult issues, expert participation, policy consultation, open hearing, deliberative dialogue and media discussion are some of the main forms of democratic and

¹⁷ Yan Jirong, “Minzhu zhi kunju yu chulu” (Democracy’s Dilemmas and Solutions), in *Chinese-Style Democracy*, pp. 116–25.

¹⁸ Huang Weiping, “Zhongguo xuanju minzhu: cong guangdu dao shendu” (China’s Electoral Democracy: From Wideness to Deepness), in *Chinese-Style Democracy*, p. 136.

scientific decision-making that the government should implement. Liberal democracy is the higher form of democratic politics, in which constitutionalism, limited government, judicial independence, media freedom and checks and balances are some of the key democratic institutions that have to be constructed from the top to the bottom.¹⁹

In this main volume, one could indeed find diverging opinions of what constitutes Chinese-style democracy; some are more attuned to liberal democracy while others focus more on constructing democracy of a different kind. The ideas of modernisation theory, especially the version expounded by Samuel Huntington, resonate with some Chinese scholars. Huntington's emphasis on institution-building reverberates throughout the next volume, *Constitutional Democracy*.

Constitutional Democracy (Fazhi minzhu)

A saying by Deng Xiaoping—that “democracy must be institutionalized and written into laws”—has become an often-cited dictum in almost all articles collected in this volume. However, the paucity of indigenous Chinese discourse about constitutionalism and the rule of law reveals itself here by the reliance of most Chinese scholars on Western theorists such as Locke, Montesquieu, Mill, Hayek and Sartori. However, such extensive reliance on Western theorists does not help us understand and contextualise laws and democratic institutions in a Chinese-style democracy.

Perhaps the strongest statement in favour of the rule of law in this volume comes from Pan Wei, whose argument for the supremacy of laws and proposal for a “consultative rule of law regime” has been published in English before (therefore, this will not be discussed here).²⁰ The idea of legal supremacy is contradicted, however, by the idea of “judicial democracy”, one of the “democracies” pointed out in the 2005 White Paper, in which judicial organs are not supreme but accountable to the people's congresses, the so-called “highest-power organs” (*zuigao quanli jiguan*) in China's political system. In this volume, Chinese scholars are also quite critical of “judicial democracy”. The supremacy of the People's Congress is based on the Marxist theory of “legislative-executive infusion” (*yixing heyi*). This theory accords supreme and unlimited authority to the National People's Congress (NPC), which then denies any institutional design that aims to restrain official power, and paves the way for “majority tyranny” and the abuse of legislative power. The “infusion” theory is hence at conflict with the idea of constitutionalism. Furthermore, the NPC in reality hardly lives up to the ideal of true “people's sovereignty” embodied in the theory of “legislative-executive infusion” as laid out in Marx's vision.²¹

¹⁹ He Zengke, “Minzhuhua: zhengzhi fazhan de Zhongguo moshi yu daolu” (Democratization: The China Model and Path of Democratic Development), in *Chinese-Style Democracy*, p. 238.

²⁰ See Zhao Shuisheng, ed., *Debating Political Reform in China: Rule of Law vs. Democratization* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2006).

²¹ Ji Weidong, “Zhixu de zhengtongxing wenti” (The Issue of Legitimacy in Order), in *Constitutional Democracy*, pp. 73–89.

Ji Weiping proposes a reform through the establishment of a “constitutional committee” (similar to the constitutional courts of many European countries) that is in charge of constitutional review and interpretation. It is given the power to review the constitutionality of the laws made by the Standing Committee, but not the laws made by the congress itself. This reform proposal, if adopted, will move Chinese-style democracy closer to those democracies with constitutional courts.²² Ji also suggests that the NPC should now follow the route of the British Parliament in the 1600s, when it slowly but assertively established itself as a legitimate governing body that shared power with the monarch while respecting the legitimacy of its reign. “How similar is the situation of Chinese political reform today with [England in the 1600s]! If the National People’s Congress can restrain the Party bylaws and with supervision by congress deputies while acknowledging the Party’s leadership, and can gradually eliminate the extra-judicial phenomena, then the reality of democratic constitutionalism will come closer”.²³

Andrew Nathan once noted that the assumed unity and harmony of interests between elite and masses—a key assumption among Chinese thinkers such as Liang Qichao, Mao Zedong and even radical democrats—has inhibited Chinese democratic theory in its development of ideas about checks and balances and the protection of individual rights. Although public supervision of officials is widely accepted as a norm, such supervision has never been seen as the basis of restraint on official power.²⁴ In the article by Zhang Xianming and Zhang Xihong in this volume, the authors acknowledge that under socialist democracy there are differences of “will” between the power-holders (that is, the people) and the power-executors (the officials) that require supervision and checks on official power (*quanli zhiyue*).²⁵ Would this line of argument depart from the assumed unity between elite and mass alleged by Nathan, and lead Chinese-style democracy to accept the liberal democratic doctrine of “checks and balances”? Maybe, but the problematic relationship between the Party and the law remains unanswered in most of the articles in this volume. Many of them merely follow Deng Xiaoping’s dictum that “the Party has to act within the boundary of laws and the constitution”, which is intellectually unhelpful. It boils down fundamentally to this question: is a Leninist type of party compatible with democracy and the rule of law? The next volume in the series, *Intraparty Democracy*, addresses this question.

²² Ibid, p. 87.

²³ Ji Weidong, “Zhongguo: tongguo fazhi maixiang minzhu” (China: March towards Democracy through the Rule of Law), in *Constitutional Democracy*, p. 159.

²⁴ Andrew J. Nathan, *Chinese Democracy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1985).

²⁵ Zhang Xianming and Zhang Xihong, “Shilun fazhi yu minzhu de jiben guanxi” (On the Basic Relationship between Democracy and the Rule of Law), in *Constitutional Democracy*, p. 95.

Intra-Party Democracy (Dangnei minzhu)

E.E. Schattschneider once remarked: “democracy is not to be found *in* the parties but *between* the parties”.²⁶ However, since China has eliminated competitive party politics, intra-Party democracy is said to be “vital both for internal communication and to link the party with state and society”. According to Tony Saich, “this will provide the party leadership with the necessary information to frame the general policy guidelines to suit the changing conditions”.²⁷

Hu Wei is the first author in this series to present a sophisticated theoretical argument that explains why intra-Party democracy is feasible in China. To reiterate a point mentioned above, Hu argues that the “discovery and development of the democratic resources with the established system” is a more realistic and likely successful strategy of democratisation in China. An example of such a strategy is intra-Party democracy. A democratisation strategy that bypasses the Party is either impossible or too costly. Instead, a more democratic CPC through intra-Party democracy will “push forward the democratic development of the whole of China”.²⁸ Hu advocates a three-pronged strategy: from elite to mass; from centre to grassroots; and from within the Party to the whole society. Following modernisation theory’s suggestion, Hu argues that the country’s urban citizens (not the rural residents, contrary to the existing practice of village democracy), with their higher level of economic and cultural development, are more appropriate groups for developing democracy. Just as Deng Xiaoping once said, “let some people get rich first”, Hu here argues to “let some people taste democracy first, set an example for the whole society, and then gradually expand [democracy], [and] let elite democracy guide mass democracy”.²⁹

While Hu Wei’s argument sounds elitist and not very democratic, the implications could be bold. Developing from this line of reasoning, Hu suggests that intra-Party democracy should first develop from the top and then move from the top to the bottom. The country’s top leadership, the elite of the elite, constitutes far fewer people, and henceforth is less risky. To make the Party centre more democratic, Hu recommends reforming the present concentration of power in the hands of the Politburo and Politburo Standing Committee by strengthening the role of the Party Congress and the Party’s Central Committee, which would conform more to the political structure stipulated in the Party’s constitution. To do so, implementing competitive elections (*cha’er xuanju*, more candidates than seats) constitutes the key move. Once the Party centre has firmly established competitive elections, it can expand them to lower levels of the Party hierarchy.

²⁶ E.E. Schattschneider, *Party Government* (New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1942), p. 60.

²⁷ Tony Saich, “Party Building since Mao: A Question of Style?”, in *Communist Politics: A Reader*, ed. Stephen White and Daniel Nelson (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1986), p. 201.

²⁸ Hu Wei, “Dangnei minzhu yu zhengzhi fazhan: kaifa Zhongguo minzhuhua de tizhinei zhiyuan” (Intra-Party Democracy: Develop China’s Democratic Resources within the System), in *Intra-Party Democracy*, p. 22.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

The introduction of intra-Party elections in the centre will invigorate democratic dynamism, especially when there are different elite groups pursuing different policy lines within the same centre. With competitive elections, intra-elite differences can be regulated and limited within an acceptable boundary, and resolved through an institutional channel that provides the possibilities of aggregation and bargaining. This intra-Party democracy is thus inclusive of different policy lines and expands the base of societal support for the Party's policy, and to a certain extent is a more effective substitute for inter-Party competitive politics.³⁰

Hu Wei claims that China's political structure is not monolithic. Certain tensions exist between the government, NPC and CPC, which constitute a form of checks and balances that restrains abuses of power. Given that the leaders of both the government and NPC are also Party leaders, the effectiveness of such checks and balances depends on intra-Party democracy. If intra-Party democracy is underdeveloped, and the Party becomes dictatorial, the checks and balances implied in this political design will become useless. Intra-Party democracy thus strengthens people's democracy, and the development of the latter will also push forward the development of the former. This is the route of democratisation with Chinese characteristics.

Wang Guixiu shares Hu Wei's strategic focus on intra-Party democracy. Wang does not dismiss political reforms at the margins of China's political structure (rural elections, for example), but argues that such reforms ultimately are unlikely to make a breakthrough (*tupuo*). Placing too much faith in the ability of grassroots elections to diffuse democracy appears to be wishful thinking. Instead, the breakthrough point of political reform should take place at the most sensitive, important and politically critical part of the system—namely, the Party. Intra-Party democracy therefore should be the foundational step for China's political reforms. A more confident Party (as a result of intra-Party democracy) will be able to securely handle reforms of other parts of the political system.³¹

These thought-provoking views by Hu Wei and Wang Guixiu are not in line with empirical evidence, however. In fact, intra-Party elections are more developed in the rural areas and at the grassroots level than in urban areas and at higher levels of government and society. In addition, how the formula "intra-Party democracy leading people's democracy" actually works is still murky and unaddressed.

In a recent article, Li Cheng lists elections, the adoption of decision-by-votes in the decision-making process, institutional regulations, the supervision system and transparency in Party affairs as major areas of intra-Party democratic reforms proposed by the Party itself.³² In this volume, the most intriguing ideas lie not only in discussions of what reform measures the Party should undertake but also in the theoretical

³⁰ Similar (though not the same) arguments can be found in Li Cheng, "Intra-Party Democracy in China: Should We Take It Seriously?", *Chinese Leadership Monitor* 30 (November 2009): 2.

³¹ Wang Guixiu, "Tantan zhengzhi tizhi gaige de tupokou wenti" (Discussion on the Breakthrough Point of Political Reform), in *Intra-Party Democracy*, pp. 37–44.

³² Li, "Intra-Party Democracy", pp. 7–11.

arguments made for a *democratic communist party*. To achieve the latter, Chinese scholars have searched through the writings of Marx, Engels and Lenin to describe how a Leninist party can be democratically organised. The most important aspect here is the focus on the Party Congress. According to Gao Fang, a proletarian party true to its tradition allows only one institution to assume the role of the government's "highest organ of power", and that is the Party Congress. It elects the Central Committee, which actually acts only as an executive arm of the congress. Article 10 of the Constitution of the CPC, which stipulates that all Party members and Party organisations shall follow the Party Congress and Central Committee, is therefore *incompatible* with this tradition. In the present structure, the Politburo Standing Committee leads the Politburo, the Politburo leads the Central Committee and the Central Committee leads the Party Congress; this structure deviates from the true principles of the proletarian party. Since the Party Congress is the government's highest organ of authority, the congress must meet annually to make all of its important decisions. Marx, Engels and Lenin all maintained this tradition; whereas Stalin, and later Mao, deviated from this principle. The five-year tenure stipulated for each congress still does not reflect this democratic principle. Moreover, according to this line of thinking, debates at the party congresses during Lenin's time were free and lively, and congress attendees enjoyed the right to raise any issues regarding the theory, programmes and policies of the party, and to question and criticise party leaders. Dissenters could submit alternative proposals for discussion and a vote by congress participants. In contrast to these democratic features of a true proletarian party, the present CPC's Party Congress is too ineffective and timid.

Gao also examines other aspects of the Party structure. The Politburo did not exist in the time of Marx and Engels; Lenin established it to manage the party more effectively. The Politburo, however, operated on a collective basis. Unfortunately, Stalin later usurped it in his grab for power. The Politburo, therefore, should revert to its original purpose: as an organ of the central committee, which itself is an executive arm of the party congress. The same is true of party inspection commissioners. In Lenin's time, they could investigate any form of corruption and wrongdoing by any party member, including leaders at all levels. The party's finances were open to inspection at every party congress. Again, it was Stalin who placed the inspection commission under party leadership. The CPC, therefore, should follow Lenin's original model, in which the Party inspection commission functioned as a parallel and independent institution vis-à-vis the Party leadership. It should even let Party members inspect the properties and finances of the Party, Gao adds.³³

Gao Fang's proposal, therefore, urges the Party to go back to its Marxist-Leninist roots, correct its Stalinist deviations and become a truly democratic proletarian party. In his other article for this volume, Gao analyses and praises the "annual meeting and

³³ Gao Fang, "Dangnei minzhu shi minzhu zhizheng de shouyao guanjian" (Intra-Party Democracy is Crucial for Democratic Governing), in *Intra-Party Democracy*, pp. 140–8.

delegate tenure system” (*dangdaihui nianhuizhi yu changgrenzhi*), citing extensively from Lenin again to make his points. Under this system, the congress meets annually to discuss and decide on important matters. It allows Party delegates to keep in touch with their constituents, stay focused on the issues raised in the congress and continue to supervise the work of the Party Congress when it is not in session. Party delegates are subject to elections after their terms expire, and can be recalled.³⁴

According to Gao, if this system were implemented, the Party’s central locus of power would transfer from the central committee and its Politburo to the Party Congress. Abuse of power among Party leaders will greatly decrease. The success of this system also requires the reform of the CPC’s intra-Party electoral system. Problems within the present system include the transfer of elected leaders at will by higher levels of leadership, nomination restrictions, limited competitive elections and irregularities in the electoral procedure. Wang Guixiu in particular points to the many Party regulations that contradict the electoral principles stipulated in the Constitution of the CPC, such as the “Regulations on Party and State Leadership Cadres’ Promotion and Selection” (*dangzheng lingdao ganbu xuanba renrong tiaoli*).³⁵

This volume therefore contains some very critical comments on the deficiencies that exist in the state of intra-Party democracy today. In their search for methods of democratising the Party, these Chinese scholars, many of whom attached to Party schools, are not necessarily looking to liberal democracies as guides. Instead, they return to Marx, Engels and Lenin. Unfortunately, empirical studies of intra-Party democratic reforms are lacking in this volume. Little is said about one aspect of intra-Party democracy that has actually manifested: the grassroots “two-ballot” system. Fortunately, it is addressed in the next volume.

Grassroots Democracy (Jiceng minzhu)

The “grassroots democracy” section of the 2005 White Paper identifies four democratic practices as the major elements in grassroots democracy: democratic elections, democratic decision-making, democratic management and democratic supervision. Most articles in this volume concentrate on village elections, however. Readers might feel a bit disappointed, therefore, that the editors chose not to include more articles discussing democracy in urban communities and state-owned enterprises, as well as the three other practices (decision-making, management and supervision). An exception to this generalisation is the article by Lang Youxing and He Baogang, who examine the role and structure of the village assembly and the village representatives’ assembly as a form of democratic decision-making. They show that these assemblies remain a far cry from the ideal “direct democracy”, and do not function effectively as

³⁴ Gao Fang, “Dang daibiao dahui nianhuizhi, changgrenzhi de youlai he yiyi” (The Origins and Meaning of the Annual Meeting and Tenure System), in *Intra-Party Democracy*, pp. 196–208.

³⁵ Wang Guixiu, “Gaige he wanshan dangnei xuanju zhidu fazhan dangnei minzhu” (Reform and Improve Intra-Party Electoral System and Develop Intra-Party Democracy), in *Intra-Party Democracy*, pp. 187–95.

institutions of “representative democracy”. While Lang and He do not dismiss these assemblies completely, they question the assumption that democratic decision-making can be guaranteed as long as these assemblies exist.

Pluralistic governance constitutes one of the most important characteristics of village governance in China, which involves a variety of actors such as the village social elite, political authorities outside the village, and some of the authoritative bodies that exist between the two (such as village committees and village Party committees).³⁶ Their close cooperation ensures effective government, while conflicts among them produce negative effects on rural governance. Democratic elections may not solve all of a village’s problems, and failure to secure cooperation from all the relevant actors may actually only worsen the situation. As Xu Yong noted, the years after the promulgation of the village committee law (draft version in 1987, full version in 1998) saw not a decline but instead an increase in rural “collective incidents”.³⁷

Stable governance also depends on resolving the so-called “two-committee” problem: the conflict between the village committee and village Party committee. The implementation of competitive elections at the village level seriously challenges the authority of the village Party branch. In order to address this issue, several localities experimented with a “two-ballot” system, which requires a person to obtain popular endorsement by winning a village election as a prerequisite to assuming the position as the Party’s leader. This fuses the roles of Party leader and village committee leader into one. If a non-Party member wins a village election, then non-Party villagers cast votes to nominate candidates while Party members cast votes to elect the village leadership. In this case, the offices of village Party leader and village committee leader remain separate, but both rely on a certain base of popular support. Furthermore, the Party should recruit non-Party village leaders.³⁸ “The successful implementation of the ‘two-ballot’ system,” writes Jing Yuejin, “rebuilds the legitimacy of the village party organisation as it resolves the conflicts between the two committees”.³⁹ Here, intra-Party democracy and grassroots democracy also meet. Proponents of Chinese-style democracy believe that the principle of Party leadership can reconcile with the democratic principle, and that the “two-ballot” system provides one plausible example of the compatibility between them.

China’s rural governance is also a form of elite governance. Legitimate village leaders inevitably come from either local gentry with cultural capital (in the premodern period) or “capable people” (*nengren*) who can lead villagers to prosperity (*zhifu*). These

³⁶ Yu Keping and Xu Xiuli, “Zhongguo nongcun zhili de lishi yu xianzhuang” (History and the Present Situation of China’s Rural Governance), in *Grassroots Democracy*, p. 106.

³⁷ Xu Yong, “Cunmin zizhi de chengzhang: xingzheng fangquan yu shehui fayu” (The Growth of Village Self-Governance: Administrative Delegation of Power and Social Development), in *Grassroots Democracy*, p. 260.

³⁸ Guo Zhenglin, “Zhongguo nongcun eryuan quanli jiegoulun” (The Dual Power Structure in China’s Villages), in *Grassroots Democracy*, pp. 206–8; Jing Yuejin, “Liangpiaozhi: zuzhi jishu yu xuanju moshi” (Two-Ballot System: Organisational Technique and Electoral Model), in *Grassroots Democracy*, pp. 244–5.

³⁹ Jing, “Liangpiaozhi” (Two-Ballot System), p. 248.

leaders would then be absorbed into the system and thereafter play the dual role of “agents of the state” and “masters of the village”. Hence, there is a very rich cultural tradition in rural China that legitimises “capable leaders”.⁴⁰ The implication of this analysis is significant for Chinese politics. It seems to suggest that meritocracy, “capable leadership” and strong governance indeed form very strong foundations for political legitimacy in China, probably more so than vote counting. It therefore does not seem so abnormal for the Party to infuse village-Party organisations and village committees, no matter how absurd that might look in the eyes of liberal democrats, as long as it produces strong leadership and governance.

Of course, this does not suggest that elections do not matter. Electoral democracy improves the democratic-rights consciousness of villagers and changes the dynamics of the mass-cadre relationship for the better. However, as a meritocratic selection method, village elections can also be a mechanism for elite absorption by the Party-state. This radically differs from the liberal democratic concept of election. According to the liberal concept, elections serve as a platform on which to resolve the struggle for power between different social interests aggregated into political parties. Political parties compete against each other on the basis of different policy programmes and agendas that reflect the articulation and aggregation of societal interests. This is the logic of political-interest pluralism in liberal democracies. However, the CPC claims to represent the interests of all Chinese people. The transformation of the CPC into a kind of “catch-all” party⁴¹ thus renders multiparty politics unnecessary. Competitive elections in a one-party state therefore are more likely to be contests based on such factors as personalities, capabilities, skills and access to resources. In other words, competitive elections are only a means to achieve good governance, not liberal democracy.⁴²

Overall, this volume on grassroots democracy is well collected, with a number of strong empirical studies. That said, it does not possess enough articles on grassroots democratic governance to meet demand. Some articles in the final volume of the series, *Deliberative Democracy*, do discuss democratic governance under the context of deliberative democracy, the subject of the next volume in the series.

Deliberative Democracy (Xieshang minzhu)

Some Chinese scholars are excited by the development of deliberative democratic theories in the West, which seems to confirm their view that liberal democracy is indeed inadequately democratic. Furthermore, the Chinese translation of the term “deliberative”, *xieshang*, is contained in the name of the main political organ in which

⁴⁰ Yu and Xu, “Zhongguo nongcun zhili de lishi yu xianzhuang” (History and the Present Situation of China’s Rural Governance), pp. 62–112.

⁴¹ See Zheng and Lye, “Is Democratization Compatible with China’s One-Party System?”, p. 24. See also Zheng Yongnian, “Interest Representation and the Transformation of the Chinese Communist Party”, in *Bringing the Party Back In: How China is Governed*, ed. Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard and Zheng Yongnian (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2004), pp. 269–301.

⁴² See also similar observations made by John Wong, “Better Governance, Not Democracy, as China’s Immediate Development Challenge”, *East Asian Policy* 2, no. 4 (2010): 29–37.

the CPC practises “multiparty consultation and cooperation under the leadership of the party”—the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC, *Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi*). According to some Chinese scholars, the CPPCC’s indigenous development seems to suggest that the Chinese search for an alternative form of democratic rule is not a sham but instead a fruitful endeavour that converges with the deliberative democrats. They use the deliberative democratic thesis, that “the basis of democracy is deliberation, not election”, as the premise of their support for Chinese-style democracy and refutation of liberal democracy.

There are also Chinese scholars, such as Jin Anping and Yao Chuanming, who do not rule out the democratic potentials of deliberative democracy in China but nonetheless criticise those who celebrate deliberative theories as a confirmation that a Chinese form of democratic practice exists. The mistranslation of the Chinese term *xieshang* as “deliberative” (rather than “consultative”) is unfortunate, because the “consultative” nature of the CPPCC has nothing to do with deliberative democracy. Deliberative democrats search for an ideal public sphere, one that allows tolerance of different opinions, rational deliberation, open access to information and full participation on an equal basis by all stakeholders in the process of decision-making. The CPPCC is far from being the concrete platform on which to build this ideal public sphere, because its members come from the elite strata of Chinese society, and it possesses no law-making powers.⁴³

In contrast, Chen Jiagang pointedly disagrees that *xieshang* is a mistranslation of the term “deliberative”. According to him, the CPPCC represents a mature framework that allows various sectors within society to participate and articulate their interests, including ethnic minorities. It has the advantage of uniting majority and minority opinions through democratic dialogue in a spirit of tolerance and compromise. Other than the CPPCC, deliberative democratic institutions can also be found in the form of the legislative hearing system, democratic “heart-to-heart talks” and grassroots deliberative councils, among others.⁴⁴ Even if the current practices remain somewhat flawed, the values of deliberative democracy are fully compatible with both the goals of China’s political development and the values of communist traditions. For example, democracy in traditional Chinese communist parlance refers not only to a system but also to a “work style”. Communist cadres are required to exhibit a “democratic work style”, such as the practice of the “mass line”. The “mass line” tradition does make the Party more responsive to popular opinion, of course, but it is truly ingenious to claim that this mass-line work style, developed during the revolutionary years, resonates with deliberative democratic ideals and forms the basis for democratic decision-making.⁴⁵

⁴³ Jin Anping and Yao Chuanming, “Xieshang minzhu: zai Zhongguo de wudu, ouhe yiji chuanguangzhaoxing zhuanhuan de keneng” (Deliberative Democracy: Its Misreading, Connection and the Possibility of Creative Transformation in China), in *Deliberative Democracy*, pp. 126–38.

⁴⁴ Chen Jiagang, “Xieshang minzhu yu dangdai Zhongguo de zhengzhi fazhan” (Deliberative Democracy and Development of Contemporary Chinese Politics), in *Deliberative Democracy*, pp. 139–54.

⁴⁵ He Baogang, “Zhongguo de xieshang minzhu zhidu” (China’s Deliberative Democratic System), in *Deliberative Democracy*, p. 115.

Another major theme in this volume is the relationship between electoral and deliberative democracy. One oft-cited sentence in this volume comes from a 2006 document entitled “Opinions on Strengthening the Work of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference”. It states: “Citizens practicing their electoral rights in elections and citizens having full deliberation with the goal of reaching a consensus as much as possible for all major decisions, are the two important forms of socialist democracy in China”. However, Lin Shangli suggests that China should focus instead on developing deliberative democracy first. Accordingly, deliberation and cooperation with the goal of reaching public good is a far better process of interest articulation and integration than pluralistic competition for votes:

Under the conditions of pluralistic democratic competition, no matter how fair the electoral procedure is, the highly divisive partisan interests will unlikely achieve an electoral result that reflects maximally the interest of all the voters. Under the conditions of deliberative politics, election is not the beginning point of a democratic process. A proceduralised, institutionalised system of communication and coordination within an organised framework for the opinions, interests, and relations of all interest holders in the society is the beginning point of a democratic process. In such a situation, electoral focus would not be partisan interests but public interests. Electoral choice would not be a partisan choice but a choice by the public on public interests. Deliberative politics hence does not deny electoral democracy. However, it aims to construct elections on the basis of effective political and social deliberation.⁴⁶

This formulation subsumes electoral democracy under deliberative democracy and consequently will result in elections with a high degree of consensus. A passage by Li Weihai, a long-time Party leader in the CPC’s united-front work, is worth quoting here as well:

Within the people’s united front, the internal relations are adjusted through deliberation, important decisions about matters of state are decided after deliberation, and nominations for elections are made through deliberation. In the deliberative process all opinions are exchanged, debates are raised, right opinions and wrong opinions are ascertained, and consensus is reached. Thus, in elections or decisions-by-votes, we see highly consensual or unanimous vote choices.⁴⁷

According to this line of reasoning, the near-unanimous electoral results are not necessarily reflective of the people’s opinions, and are therefore fake, as a liberal democrat would suspect. However, they are results of a “deliberative” form of “electoral democracy”. This is indeed an interesting argument; unfortunately it is backed with little empirical evidence.

Some scholars see electoral democracy and deliberative democracy as complementary processes. Yan Jirong delineates three forms of democracy in a policy-making process. The first form is electoral democracy, which decides the first stage of policy-making: the selection of policy-makers through free and fair elections. The second is democratic decision-making, which corresponds to the stage in which policies are

⁴⁶ Lin Shangli, “Xieshang zhengzhi: dui Zhongguo minzhu zhengzhi fazhan de yizhong sikao” (Deliberative Politics: A Consideration of China’s Democratic Political Development), in *Deliberative Democracy*, p. 81.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Jin and Yao, “Xieshang minzhu” (Deliberative Democracy), p. 135.

formulated, and stakeholders should exercise their right to deliberate on the policies that concern them. The third form is supervision democracy, which corresponds to the final stage: the assessment of the effects of policy implementation. The public shall have the right to evaluate and question these policies and their implementation, protected by freedom of speech. Deliberative democracy thus directs our attention to the decision-making process. Formulating policies that would respond to people's demands and improve their lives is not necessarily less important than electing the decision-makers. In this sense, deliberative democracy complements election-based liberal democracy.⁴⁸

This is similar to the idea of “administrative democracy”. Jing Yuejing categorises four types of political systems based on two variables: democratic election and democratic decision-making (characterised by citizens' deliberation and participation). A system with both variables makes an ideal democratic polity. A system with electoral democracy but without mechanisms of democratic decision-making constitutes what we generally refer to as a liberal democracy. A system with mechanisms of democratic decision-making but without electoral democracy is called “administrative democracy”. A system without both is an autocracy. Although liberal democracy is the dominant form of discourse in the contemporary world, administrative democracy offers no less a legitimate form of democratic government and also results in desirable policy effects, supervision of officials and political legitimacy.⁴⁹ The irony in China today is that without the full realisation of electoral democracy, people have realised “administrative democracy” in some form at the local level, the most famous of which is the town of Wenling, with its deliberative democratic meetings. Jing, however, does not see administrative democracy as the endpoint to China's democratic development. Instead, it marks a step towards the ideal democratic polity.

CRITIQUES OF CHINESE-STYLE DEMOCRACY

I shall first point out certain weaknesses in this book series. First, both liberal and Maoist-leftist scholars are not well represented in the series. The editors could argue that their selection of essays has to reflect mainstream viewpoints on Chinese-style democracy, rather than the liberals who will likely embrace universal liberal democracy, the Confucianist democrats who persist in small numbers, or the Maoists whose “big democracy” during the Cultural Revolution failed. Still, I would like to see the series better reflect the full ideological spectrum of Chinese discourse on democracy, whatever their (dis)agreements with Chinese-style democracy.

⁴⁸ Yan Jirong, “Xieshang minzhu de jiazhi he yiyi” (The Value and Meaning of Deliberative Democracy), in *Deliberative Democracy*, pp. 33–40.

⁴⁹ Jing Yuejin, “Xingzheng minzhu: yiyi yu juxian” (Administrative Democracy: Meaning and Limitation), in *Deliberative Democracy*, pp. 261–6. This idea of “administrative democracy” is quite similar to the ideas on democratic public participation expounded by Wang Shaoguang; see, for example, *Qumei yu chaoyue: fansi minzhu, ziyou, pingdeng, gongmin shehui* (*Demystification and Beyond: Reflecting on Democracy, Liberty, Equality, Civil Society*) (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2010).

Second, there are other interesting developments in Chinese politics and important concerns that the series does not include. It fails to discuss the policy of “openness in government affairs” (*zhengwu gongkai*) and the People’s Congress elections. Human rights issues are missing from the book series as well. Proponents of Chinese-style democracy could attack liberal democracy for failing to respond to people’s preferences, which has some basis of truth; however, it would be difficult to claim that liberal democracy fails to protect human rights. As a presumed competitor with the liberal democratic model, the failure to address human rights issues in these mainstream discourses on Chinese-style democracy is unfortunate.

Third, too many articles merely consist of assertive statements without the backing of any empirical evidence. These articles do not help people understand how a Chinese-style democracy really works and operates. Only one volume, *Grassroots Democracy*, contains many empirically oriented articles, and gives readers many insights into the causes, effects and issues that relate to grassroots elections. This is also the volume that appears to be more sober in its assessments of the various aspects of China’s political system. With more empirical studies of the rule of law, intra-Party democracy and deliberative democracy in China, the Chinese themselves could obtain a more realistic assessment of the workings of this Chinese model of democracy.

Yuan Zaijun’s *The Failure of China’s “Democratic” Reforms* essentially answers this call for greater empirical examination (or what he calls an “evidence-based” approach) of Chinese-style democracy. The title of his book clearly reveals his conclusion: that intra-Party democracy (including the reform of the Party Congress and electoral system) and deliberative democracy both remain within the reach of Party control. In addition, Yuan examines the reforms of elections for township mayor and local People’s Congress. In fact, all major political reforms undertaken by the Party at either the centre or localities all constitute “controllable” reforms. In all the procedures of these reforms, there lies a crucial step in which the Party can exert its control in order to counter any public influence over the selection of officials or policy-making. In Yuan’s judgement, all these reforms are futile, and he gives credit only to the “independent candidates” in local People’s Congress elections.

Yuan condemns Chinese-style democracy from the standpoint of liberal democracy. He is not impressed by deliberative democracy. A democracy can only be judged by the criterion used to select the source of power (election of officials), he argues, not by the style or the way such power is exercised (democratic public administration or deliberative democracy). Thus, the only meaningful reform is electoral reform, which the Party’s interference and manipulation continually hampers; eventually, it all stops at the township level. Intra-Party and deliberative democracy (his book omits constitutional and grassroots democracy) are allowed to develop simply because they cannot touch China’s one-Party framework, so the Party considers them “safe”. In this regard, Yuan concludes, “of course, ‘socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics’ is not democratic”.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Yuan Zaijun, *The Failure of China’s “Democratic” Reforms* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012), p. 147.

To Yuan, proponents of Chinese-style democracy therefore propagandise false hope, and are even propagandists themselves. Indeed, he would have dismissed the Book Series on Chinese-Style Democracy as a piece of propaganda lacking any substance. Here lies my disagreement with Yuan. Among Chinese scholars, a fair number of propagandists undoubtedly exist, but among them are those who nonetheless still genuinely push China forward. Hu Wei, He Zengke, Jing Yuejin, Yan Jirong and others, who promoted intra-Party and/or deliberative democracy, are known in China as reformists or liberals. They try to improve the present system, not necessarily because they want to protect Party officials, but because they know that this is a realistic strategy that will give the people a greater voice in matters of governance. Of course, many academic proponents of Chinese-style democracy might harbour underlying utilitarian motives. Proponents of liberal democracy will win hardly any official research funding and support, while researchers of Chinese-style democracy will reap larger quantities of funding and support.⁵¹ Nevertheless, advocating Chinese-style democracy does not necessarily contradict with advocating for political progress. Without the regime's collapse, liberal democracy will not be installed in China overnight. Imperfect as it is, to many reformist scholars in China, Chinese-style democracy still represents progress.

In contrast to Yuan's book, Kerry Brown's *Ballot Box China* is more sympathetic. Brown does not support the notion of Chinese-style democracy, but does take the discourses of Chinese-style democracy seriously. He does not simply dismiss official discourse (e.g. the White Paper, the conservatives' "Six-Why" series, etc.) and academic discourse (e.g. the political reform report, *Storming the Fortress*), but critically engages and discusses them.

Brown writes: "It is clear that the space for legitimate discussion of political options, and the need for fundamental change, is growing. The moment is gradually approaching when there will be open talk of a future in which the CCP is itself forced to undergo profound changes in the way it accounts for its powers, its role in society, its own governance and its exercise of power".⁵² Brown asks the rhetorical question: "Can China create democracy, but with one party in power?". However, he does not respond with a "yes" or "no". He cites relevant Chinese scholars and researchers in the field in order to demonstrate the diverse viewpoints and discourse underway among Chinese themselves. In discussing intra-Party democracy, Brown again takes a serious look at the arguments and debates currently waging within the Party, although he recognises that such an idea sounds "counter-intuitive". The Party consequently appears to be less monolithic than it does in Yuan's book. To Brown, Chinese-style democracy appears to be non-democratic, although this may reflect the compromise between Party reformers and hardliners that is necessary for the Party to move forward. In contrast, Brown is more perceptive about the discourse and practices of Chinese-style democracy.

⁵¹ I wish to thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

⁵² Kerry Brown, *Ballot Box China: Grassroots Democracy in the Final Major One-Party State* (London: Zed Books, 2011), p. 48.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The book series may or may not convince readers that Chinese-style democracy offers a viable democratic alternative; however, it does buttress the argument that Chinese-style democracy at least has certain features, elements and institutions that we deem positive to the democratic development of the country. For example, in discourse about the rule of law, even among conservative scholars, hostility no longer exists towards key liberal concepts such as a limited government. Chinese scholars, in looking for strategies to democratise their own country, do not necessarily find intellectual inspiration in universalistic liberal democracy, but instead look to their own intellectual roots (even Leninism can inspire democratic thinking, as seen earlier). Imagine if in the future the process of the “two-ballot” system is somehow implemented at the national level, combined with a form of “constitutional party-rule” that resembles constitutional monarchy, albeit with a party that is significantly involved in policy-making. Imagine also that the Party is democratically run as envisioned by proponents of intra-Party democracy, combined with extensive deliberation and participation from the public at the local and municipal levels of decision-making. Will the Chinese, then, still be far-fetched to claim that they have constructed a Chinese-style democracy? Of course, we have no answer to that until we see it emerge.

Elements and institutions of Chinese-style democracy may not fulfil Dahl’s standard list, but they are a start. Chiou C.L., in assessing the democratic thinking of an earlier generation of intellectuals and scholars (many of whom turned dissident after 1989), argued that none of these democratic reform proposals “challenged the CCP’s dictatorial rule ... that even had they been fully implemented ... they would not basically change the authoritarian nature of Chinese politics”.⁵³ However, I would agree more with Howard Wiarda when he writes that it is important to “[nurture] home-grown, local, and indigenous institutions, which are often the only viable ones in the society, and carefully [cultivate] them—meanwhile encouraging economic, social, and political growth—until they have a chance to flower into full-fledged democracy”.⁵⁴ This is similar to the kind of democratisation strategy advocated by proponents of Chinese-style democracy. Critics of Chinese-style democracy could charge that the ultimate end point of such a democratisation strategy still will not lead China towards convergence with the liberal democratic model. But what these Chinese scholars are concerned with are realistic and viable strategies for now. To this end, the book series is worth our serious reading.

⁵³ Chiou, *Democratizing Oriental Despotism*, p. 60.

⁵⁴ Howard Wiarda, “Introduction: Democracy and Democratization: Product of Western Tradition or a Universal Phenomenon?”, in *Comparative Democracy and Democratization*, ed. Howard Wiarda (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt College Publishers, 2002), p. 8.