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Is China democratising?

HU JINTAO'S ANSWER: "I DON'T KNOW, WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY A DEMOCRACY?"[1]

This report will attempt to frame recent socio-political developments in China under the concept of democratisation. From an investigation of opinion diversity as a potential root of democratisation, the report progresses to an analysis of two complimentary grassroots developments - institutional reforms and the emergence of an 'e-democracy'. An attempt to evaluate the democratising effect of these developments entails a reconsideration of democracy's instantiations and the Chinese state-society relationship – suggesting that any discussion about democratisation in China is as much about our notion of democracy as it is about China. The report suggests that China's democratic deficit stems not primarily from a lack of multiparty elections but from an underdeveloped civil society. It is from this position that the prospects of Chinese democratisation have to be evaluated.

Diversity and 'elite democratisation'

In a country, which has repeatedly lobbied the European Union for recognition of its "market economy status", the fate of Xin Ziling, a former official at the China National Defence University, appears contradictory. In May he was officially accused of advocating the 'capitalist road' – a "major error" (Bandurski, "Prominent reformist"). Against the background of a spate of contradictory actions such as the officially condoned disappearance of an only recently unveiled Confucius statue from Tiananmen Square, this undermines the perception of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as a monolithic totality. What is more important? "Making the cake bigger or dividing it more fairly?" - this is a question going to the very heart of any socio-political agenda and remarkably it is an ideological debate raging within the CCP's upper echelons (Wu Z.).

An analogy drawn by Leng Rong, the CCP Literature Research Centre's leader, suggests opinion diversity within the CCP as a fertile starting point for an investigation into China's democratisation and 'Intra-party democracy'. Rong draws parallels between the processes of consensus building to arrive at a majority decision among multiple factions within a pragmatic party, and the discussion between multiple, competing, ideological parties (Kuhn 485). One objection is that the CCP's political spectrum cannot rival in width the right/left political spectrum of established multiparty systems such as the US. However, the opinion differences between liberals, moderates and hardliners, spread across a web of organizations advancing their own agenda under a murky chain of control, run deeper than the differences dividing the Democratic and Republic Party (Sisci, "Many roads"). It is the imposition of the Western autocrat-liberal duality, which clashes with the a priori assumption of the CCP's ruling monopoly as the common framework for constructive opinion deliberation[2], that underlies the objection.
Rong raises a more substantial criticism of the analogy: In contrast to a multiparty sys-

[1] Answer was given by Hu Jintao (the Chinese President) at a 2006 White House press conference.

[2] Any opinion diversity, if it is to be fruitful, necessitates underlying common assumptions and the delineation of a political spectrum based on the acceptance of these assumptions, i.e. in Western democracies this founding commonality is the belief in the "representative democracy" state framework.

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tem, in China views are not contested in public view (Kuhn 485). A situation which is changing, as indicated by a recent series of editorials in the People's Daily, the party's 'throat and tongue'. Following the publication of two editorials referring to Voltaire to call for more tolerance towards non-conformists and the acknowledgement of their "sunken voices", an editorial by the Central Commission on Disciplinary Inspection called for more party discipline, reprimanding "a very small minority" of officials for having spoken out of turn regarding fundamental party principles (Lam). This much-publicised exchange of diametrically opposite views[3] suggests that People's Daily is evolving into a public intra-party discussion platform. Furthermore, public intellectuals and media outlets are increasingly acting as vicarious public representatives of political leaders' ideological views. A Maoist online publication 'Utopia' is supported alongside an unusually outspoken right party journal 'Yanhuang Chunqiu', while leaders are aligning themselves with and affording protection to scholars, making possible unprecedentedly critical comments by public intellectuals such as Wu Jinglian or Yu Jianrong – both of whom hold official positions[4]. By distinguishing the current situation from intra-party dissent suppressed, the publicity of the debates substantiates the parallel between intra- and multiparty opinion diversity.

What role can intra-party opinion diversity play in China's democratisation – is it a basis for grassroots democracy or merely the foundation of a "democracy of the elite" involving 5 to 6 percent of the population[5] (Kuhn 486)? Yu Keping suggests that given the CCP's dominant role in the public sphere democratisation cannot be achieved without democratic habits, including a culture of pluralism, first being established within the CCP. "If grassroots democracy means pushing towards democracy from the bottom up; intra-party democracy entails doing so from the inside-out" (29).

This optimistic appraisal is supported by the wider effects of the internal divisions. Kenneth Lieberthal's term 'fragmented authoritarianism' appears appropriate. Continued control of the economy and social sphere by the party is accompanied by an authority fragmented and weak below the peak, resulting in political opportunity structures. A situation which, as David Bandurski from China Media Project notes, became very evident

in the aftermath of the Wenzhou train disaster[6]: "a story that needs to be controlled from a political standpoint but no one wants to step in and try to control it" leading to unprecedented media openness in the absence of a clamp down (Chin). At the same time intra-party opinion diversity may encourage grassroots opinion diversity by allowing 'dissidents' to redefine themselves as *tolerated* "critical intellectuals". According to Wang Hui, a leading 'New Left' intellectual, criticism is no longer inevitably regime challenging but can focus on specific policy debates (Mishra). Finally, the opinion diversification can spread to involve broader parts of the general public as it did in the aftermath of a scathing critique of Mao Zedong accusing him of having "wrecked the country and ruined the people" by the economist Mao Yushi. The publication entailed the presentation of a petition signed by nearly 10,000 people to a Beijing police station accusing Mao Yushi of slander (The Economist, "Boundlessly loyal").

Any upholding of such collective action's democratising value is invariably subject to criticism as the petition advanced a pro-governmental rather than dissident view. A similar reasoning underlies the warning, in The Economist, against overstating the in-

[3] It can be noted that similar exchanges in the People's Daily have previously taken place at times of widening intra-party divisions (see: Bandurski, David. "*What's up with the People's Daily?".* 27.05.2011. http://cmp.hku.hk/2011/05/27/12748/)

[4] See for example: Barboza, David. "China's Mr. Wu Keeps Talking". 26.09.2009. http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/27/business/global/27spy.html?pagewanted=all.

[5] Kuhn is referring to the entire Party.

[6] The train disaster in Wenzhou, Zhejiang province on July 23rd 2011 killed 40 people and left at least 192 injured. The disaster, involving the collision of two high-speed trains, had resulted from a design flaw. The handling of the rescue operation and subsequent investigation by the Railway Ministry and government provoked public anger and protest.

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tra-party opinion diversity's potential as reform minded leaders still represent a minority within the CCP ("Rising power", 18). Such criticism is misconceived: As Ai Weiwei remarked "One needs a purpose to express oneself, but the act of expression itself is its own purpose" (Obrist). In other words opinion diversity's democratising value resides not in the opinions expressed, whether progovernmental or dissident, but rather intrinsically in the act of various agents expressing their view. Chinese journalist Hu Shuli's reconception of democracy as a "democratic dialogue" stresses this (Horsley 15).
The illustrated mechanisms whereby intra-party diversity stimulates a grassroots political culture support the view expounded by Kai He et al. which identifies intra-party opinion diversities and debates as the defining factor shaping China's elite-orientated path to democratisation. But the authors acknowledge the role of intervening grassroots variables (Kai and Feng 155).

Participatory mechanisms and 'grassroots democratisation'

Having examined the role of intra-party opinion diversity, two potential grassroots evolutions are to be briefly outlined: The development of participatory mechanisms within the CCP's framework, i.e. institutional reforms, and the development of online participatory mechanisms, i.e. an 'e-democracy'.

Jamie Horsley charts the 'quiet expansion' of the intra-party forms of participation from innovative experiments at the local level, focusing on participatory villager self-governance through Local People's Congresses, in the 1980s and 90's to the *Law on Legislation* adopted in 2000 which affirms that the Chinese public should "participate in legislation through various channels" (Article 5). Horsley identifies public legislative hearings, technical seminars/workshops, and the publishing of draft laws/regulations for written comments from the general public as the key reforms. Recent examples of the successful integration and implementation of these participatory mechanisms include the 12th Five Year Program (Hefele and Lemke) and the regulation on home demolitions enacted in 2011. In the later case two drafts were published by the Legislative Affairs Office receiving more than 100,000 opinions, 45 public seminars were held, and legal academics consulted on at least two occasions (Lackner 441). As Lackner points out the law was a milestone, "the broad public participation in the legislative process was commendable and serves as a model for future legislation" (442). Significant attention has also focused on grassroots elections, the election of district-level People's Congresses. According to official information about 85% of villages have set up a system of villagers' councils and 31 provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities directly under the central government have published their own electoral measures for village committees (China Daily, "The Assessment"). More than 90% of villagers participate in their village elections (Wu J.).

The second notable development, fuelled by the IT revolution and the 'convergence of Internet and mobile telephony', is that of online participatory mechanisms very much discussed in the aftermath of the Wenzhou train disaster. In China today there are 485 million web users making the Chinese web community the third largest country in the world, of which 295 million, more than 20% of the population, are blog users. Most notably over 66% of netizens often issue views and claims on the Internet (China Daily, "The Assessment"). The writer Zhang Musheng stressed the unprecedented transformative power of this 'e-democracy': "800 million mobile phones sending out short messages…460 million notebook computers exchanging ideas…no way of comparing this to your so-called staging demonstrations, airing views and writing big-character posters" (Bandurski, "Turning back").

The examination of these participatory mechanisms' democratizing effect is invariably subject to criticism whereby they are dismissed as "disguised authoritarianism…doomed to failure". In contrast, Schubert suggests that by consistently applying a liberal democracy epistemological benchmark to China's political evolution a more nuanced analysis of sustainable legitimacy

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building through these measures is foregone (2) - an argument to be examined.

Untangling the concept of democracy

"Public participation in legislation and policy making is not a vote" (Horsley 13). Horsley's critical observation alludes to what the political scientist Benjamin Ginsberg described as the unshakable Western conviction that solely multiparty elections guarantee popular control of the government (Ginsberg 241). An assertion by Wu Bangguo, a member of the Politburo Standing Committee[7], that "China will not do multiparty governance" (Bao) and warnings by Politburo member Liu Yunshan that "copying the American system could be disastrous" (Kuhn 32) are therefore taken as negating any potential democratising value of the outlined participatory mechanisms. But does this 'one-dimensional test of democracy' do justice to democracy?

The Athenian democracy largely practiced demarchy whereby leaders were not selected by vote but rather randomly chosen by lottery[8] (Martin). In modern times recognized democracy standards, e.g. the Freedom House or Bertelsmann Transformation Index, have been continuously diversifying and evolving (Merkel 13-14). This *historical* overview indicates the importance of distinguishing between the abstract notion of democracy (people's sovereignty) and specific instantiations of this notion such as multiparty elections (Gallie 169). The instantiations are inevitably context specific rather than universal as suggested by the fukuyamian 'end of history' assumption. In propagating universal values the implicit universalization of the Western "…account of civil society, contained as it is within a wider normative democratic theory" (Baker 83) therefore has to be avoided.
As a consequence of this differentiated understanding of democracy, the view that democracy is "an essentially contested concept" (Gallie 169) can be espoused without adopting a relativistic stance compromising universal values. As Willhelm Hofmeister notes: "Democracy is democracy, also in its different forms of concretization" (9).

The altered socio-economic environment in 18th century Europe necessitated a second (re)invention of the Athenian democracy as a 'mass democracy'. Against this background, the large differences between China and the Occident suggest the necessity of a third (re)invention to "make[e] democracy save for China" (Yu xvii). In other words, the conception of democracy against which the Chinese democratisation is to be judged has to be re-evaluated and a model of "universal norms being put into practice in unique ways" developed (Merkel 9).

Locating the 'democratic deficit'

In a contemporary context, what is the role and democratising value of multiparty elections? Empirical evidence bears out a disillusionment with the multiparty electoral process as a tool of citizen empowerment. According to a 2006 PEW survey 50% of Germans do not feel that their vote gives them any power over government polities. At the same time, direct democracy, i.e. referendums, are on the rise in Germany (The Economist, "When voters"). As Vorländer observes, the cases of Stuttgart 21 and the removal of defence minister Guttenberg are symptomatic of democratic policy making processes being overruled by non-electoral and extra-institutional processes. Further support for the negative appraisal derives from the observation that online participatory mechanisms are in fact evolving across political spectrums and systems, from America to India (The Economist, "The road"). This extends their function beyond a compensation of a 'democratic deficit' supposedly unique to China and redefines them as a supplementary democratic channel satisfying demands unprovided for by elections. As Martin Jacques argued, the very view that the legitimacy of a state is necessarily a function of elections is undermined by the fact that the Chinese government enjoys more popular support than Western regimes (Jacques 2). While only 33% of Germans were satisfied with national condi-

[7] The Politburo Standing Committee is China's *de facto* highest and most powerful decision-making body.
[8] A model still used in, e.g. American court juries.

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tions in 2007, 83% of Chinese were (PEW 14).

In conclusion, the centrality of multiparty elections to the furthering of 'people's sovereignty' is questionable. Joseph Schumpeter's conception of "free, equal and secret elections" as the fulcrum of democracy represents a "minimalist concept of [electoral] democracy" (Merkel 13-14). On a more fundamental level however, elections are not only intended to ensure people's sovereignty over political policies but serve to legitimate a government and state framework. What is China to substitute?

This report will argue that it is the increasing role of the public as supervisors, whereby, as outlined in the 1982 constitution, the government "heeds [the public's] opinions [and] suggestions and accepts their supervisions" (Articles 3,27), which will ameliorate China's legitimation deficit. Rong encapsulates the resulting relationship between the government and the public, "The people assert what they need and want and the Party must provide and deliver it" (Kuhn 474) – a relationship resembling that between a ship and water whereby the "water can keep the ship afloat or sink it" (Global Times)[9].
But is this the basis of a viable political *democratic* model? The deliberative democracy model, advanced by for example Jürgen Habermas, whereby public deliberation, not voting functions as the source of legitimacy may be appropriate. The practicability of a deliberative democracy was demonstrated by a natural experiment in the Chinese township of Zeguo which began in 2005 as part of the political scientist James Fishkin's 'Deliberative Opinion Poll' project: From the township of 120,000 people a representative, random sample of 257 people, 60% of whom are farmers, was selected. They received briefings on the pros and cons of 30 potential municipal infrastructure projects, were able to question local officials/experts and to debate extensively for one day. Finally, via voting, they converged on 10 projects (which were subsequently approved by the Local People's Congress), showing a decided preference for environmental projects vis-à-vis flashier "prestige" projects. The deliberative procedure has since been adapted for the town's yearly budget allocation (Jakes).

But returning to Athens' demarchy raises a philosophical caveat: In Athens selected leaders could be impeached and removed from office by public complaint at regular meetings. In China, what will replace this mechanism and bind the government to its commitment in the government-supervisor relationship? What convinces Zhang Honglong, local government chief economist in the drought hit Anshun region, that attracting central government attention to the lack of funds will indisputably remediate the problem (Qiu and Yang)? What guarantees that by gathering opinions and attention behind issues, netizens will be able to influence political agendas, that online 'wailing walls' will become forums of citizen-government dialogue?

The answer is provided by a state-society relationship with 'Chinese characteristics'. The classification of China as a 'civilization-type nation' rather than a 'nation state' by Zhang Weiwei, a professor at the Geneva School of Diplomacy and International relations, is pivotal. In China a "millennia-old civilization…coincides with the morphology of a modern state" (Zhang). As such the party exists a priori as the guardian of unity, territorial integrity and sovereignty. This a priori legitimacy of the Party can be understood by drawing on the political scientist David Easton's differentiation between 'specific political support' based on an evaluation of the government's performance and 'diffuse political support' which "refers to the evaluation of what an object is or represents…not of what it does" (Easton 444). In contrast to most "old democratic and developed countries", ranking highly only on 'specific political support' China is remarkable for the high degree of 'diffuse political support', according to Ren "almost the highest among all [70] countries sur-

[9] An allusion to the Chinese idiom 'zaizhoufuzhou' ("to carry a boat or to overturn a boat").

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veyed" (106-107)[10]. This gives credence to the view that "China's high level of voiced political support is to a great degree [performance unrelated] and related to China's political system" (120)[11].

Employing Isaiah Berlin's model, the pursuit of liberalistic negative liberty ('freedom from'), in which the state is perceived as an intruder, finds its antithesis in the Chinese comprehension of the party as a guarantor of positive liberty ('freedom to'). The party as the patriarch, protecting and administrating citizens as its own children - a tradition, reflected in the ancient statesman ideal 'fuguan' ('fu' meaning parent) (Kuhn 481). While in Germany "Merkel's unspoken paternalism" is seen as a form of political arrogance (Kurbjuweit), the Chinese influential pro-reform Party elder Zhou Ruijin "hope[s]… [that] all people can hear [the Party's] warm and sincere words: 'Rest assured, we'll handle this'" (Bandurski, "Harsh policies").

The government is ascribed moral virtue in line with Confucian tradition and is seen as aiming to increase people's well-being irrespective of ideologies. It is a party "motivated by ideological vision but not bound by ideological dogma" (Kuhn 486). This (increasing) pragmatism manifested itself in Hu Jintao's recent speech commemorating the CCP's 90th anniversary. A statistical analysis of 'political trademarks' used, reveals that in comparison to previous anniversary speeches the ideologically charged 'Deng Xiaoping theory', the 'Three represents' and Hu Jintao's 'Scientific Outlook on Development' dropped in frequency, while the unaffiliated, non-ideological and hence pragmatic term 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' experienced a dramatic rise (Qian). Deng Xiaoping's maxim 'speaking truth through facts' ('shishiqiushi') encapsulates this. The ultimate truth standard is not ideology but facts, i.e. Chinese people's welfare forms the founding pillar upon which all policies are based while Party leadership is more fundamental than any particular ideology espoused.

Employing the rise in civil unrest, from 60,000 'mass incidents' in 2006 to 90,000 such incidents in 2009 (Buckley and Huang), or the finding that in 2006 43% of small town residents were dissatisfied with their local governments (Thornton 138), to challenge the outlined state-society relationship is to falsely apply a "dichotomous opposition between state and society", derived from modern Western experience, to China (Huang 216). A 2002 empirical study of rural protests by O'Brien and Li which found protesting residents protesting *for* the Party in need of their assistance, some demonstrators comparing themselves to Party martyrs, highlights the inapplicability of the Western binary opposition (89, 106). Rather, the division between 'min' (people) and 'guan' (officials) has to be understood as a division between the people and wicked officials ('jianchen') criticised for missimplementing beneficial policies (44). The benevolent emperor's role was traditionally confined to mediating among different constituents. A spate of recent unrests validates the analysis. When thousands of residents gathered for a protest in Guizhou province the fault lines ran between citizens and urban administration officials rather than the Party, who vowed to order the officials to exercise more restraint (Qiu and Chen).

The contractual commitment, embodied by multiparty elections, defining the Western state-society relationship is in China replaced by a morality-based legitimacy stemming from the firm conviction that the centre serves the people as their master ('weiminzuozhu'). Gradually this conviction is being institutionalised: The forthcoming amendment to the Administrative Litigation Law allows citizens to legally challenge "administrative legislation" (Zhao); while a 2011 State Council Circular called for the implementation of an evaluation system making government units' performance contingent on their constituents' satisfaction ratings (China Daily, "China's cabinet"). It bears repeating that these reforms are not to be seen as attempts to emulate a contractual formal accountability but rather op-

[10] Ren's statistical analysis of 'specific' and 'diffuse political support' is based on the 4th wave of the World Values Survey (1999-2004) (see www.worldvaluessurvey.org).

[11] This argument does not negate the performance dimension of Chinese's political support – China ranked highly in both dimensions of political support.

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erate on the basis of an underlying moral bond.

A counterintuitive argument can be made that the absence of legitimising multiparty elections in fact serves to strengthen this 'non-voting' state-society relationship, i.e. that the CCP's power monopoly entails a greater obligation to institute reforms and to promote a prosperous society (China Daily, "China 'best served'"). Several theoretical considerations support this argument. Ginsberg tendentiously suggested that elections release a government from popular control: Governments are legitimatized once every electoral cycle on the basis of an, often centrist, political program after which citizens feel that their supervisory role is exhausted. Responsibility is transferred to politicians operating in the world of 'Realpolitik' where practical constraints rather than ideology define policies (Vorländer). Minority dissent is perceived as unjustified for failing to employ 'orthodox' democratic channels – a situation corresponding to Tocqueville's 'tyranny of the majority' (1:240). In China on the other hand, constant public scrutiny of the government prevails and good governance has to continuously reaffirm the state-society social contract. "The Chinese are great critics of their rulers, perhaps even more so than Western people.. consistently and thoroughly cynical about most of their officials all the time" (Ren 35). In contrast to the Western Divine Right of Kings which invariably introduces the leaders' (not everyone of whom can be a platonic 'philosopher king') disposition as the system's Achilles heel, the Mandate of Heaven is conditional on just rule. A breaking of the moral bond between people and government legitimises popular revolt and the transferring of the Mandate to a virtuous leader (Ren 35-36). Therefore, "if the CPC does not serve the people's interest, it will no longer be the ruling party" (Kuhn 476).

Based on this re-examination of the state-society relationship in a Chinese context, the continuity of the one-party system cannot be seen as an obstacle to democratisation. Democratisation is not a Trojan Horse, continuity and organic change can be integrated: 'Rigid stability' reconceptualised as 'dynamic stability' implying "channelling everything into its proper place" (Yu xxix); traditional Confucianism reinterpreted to promote an innovative and modern three-chamber legislature with officials partly elected, partly appointed and partly selected via meritocratic Confucian exams (Fähnders). As Francesco Sisci remarked, if "we stop thinking of the Chinese Communist Party as 'communist'", i.e. reconceptualise it as a pragmatic symbol of national unity, the paradox of the Party introducing democracy and maintaining its rule may be resolved (Sisci, "China's revolution").

While the simplified deduction that "China does not hold elections, therefore its rulers do not have the consent of the ruled" (Li) can be conclusively negated, an affirmation of 'China's uniqueness' cannot result in a "complete affirmation of the status-quo in China" (Yang J.). So, wherein then lies China's 'democratic deficit'?
An indication may be provided by a strike in August 2011 involving more than 1000 taxi drivers protesting over increasing gas prices and traffic jams in the city of Hangzhou. The strike ended after three days when the government pledged to raise cab fares by October and to provide a temporary one RMB subsidy per trip (Xinhua, "Plan to raise"). The incident's significance lies in the ensuing deliberative discourse. While the policies were praised for being in the drivers' interest they were nevertheless deemed "questionable" as the government had failed to base them on a public legislative hearing (China Daily, "Debate")[12]. Adopting this line of reasoning, China's democratic deficit lies in its gravitation towards a political system in which, as Vorländer notes, "mass loyalty is achieved through a high output of [monetary support], social services and ad-hoc reactions to calm [and

[12] The local government has since complied with these demands. A public hearing on taxi fares, involving 24 representatives among them officials, members of the general public, academics and taxi drivers, will be held in September (Xinhua, "Hangzhou to hold").

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satiate] public sentiment". Bandurski terms this 'Control 2.0', a system merely cultivating a "perception of empowerment and responsiveness" which never transcends beyond particular, isolated incidents (Bandurski, "China hails"). Consequently, a 'Zeguo style' democratisation, actualizing the universal democratic value in a unique way, hinges not on multiparty elections but on the full realization of the public supervisory role's potential within the current system. A mature civil society will remedy a situation where "residents and netizens…protest, but they [do] not propose" (Moses), ergo the Chinese civil society should be taken as the yardstick for China's democratisation.

A civil society to amend 'uncivil politics'?

Tocqueville's analysis of American democracy conceptualised democracy not as a set of institutions or electoral processes but an "all-pervading and restless activity [outside the government]" defined by a set of mores, i.e. ways of thinking, acting and forms of discourse (1:291). Recent attempted democratisations in Iraq and Afghanistan have corroborated Tocqueville's analysis and shown that the lack of a congruent top-down and bottom-up democratisation may result in a "democratic opposition in the niche" bereft of any relation to the wider public (Malerius 68-69). Extending this reasoning, Chinese scholars such as Yu Keping have expounded the significance of Chinese civil society to the amelioration of China's 'democratic deficit'. This report will examine three components of a 'democratic lifestyle' central to democracy, particularly to a deliberative democracy: An active and informed citizenry; citizen organisations and a common *interest based* group identity. By establishing how and to what extend the outlined participatory mechanisms[13] further these elements, a more accurate evaluation of China's democratisation can be achieved.

A democracy requires an active and informed citizenry. While Aristotle argued that 'man is by nature a political animal', political lethargy and disinterest is prevalent: Preceding the Egyptian uprisings, 92% of young Egyptians thought that they benefited nothing from political participation and hence had no interest in it and almost 95% knew nothing about Egypt's political parties/policies (Shehata). In China, local governments have reported a frequent lack of interest and use of their Internet platforms intended to solicit public input (Horsley 14). Notwithstanding selected empirical evidence discrediting the "prevalent perception" that Chinese are politically apathetic, cultivating a political citizenry remains a challenge. Results indicate that regardless of a high level of interest, Chinese rarely talk about or discuss politics (Yang Z., 7-8). As Liu Chaorui, the party chief of Dengzhou County in Henan province acclaimed for its innovative grassroots democracy, has emphasised "It's only after people learn what's going on they can truly exercise their rights to participate and supervise" (Hu).

The shift in Egyptian youths' political attitudes demonstrates the effectiveness of online participatory mechanisms. In contrast to conventional political channels emphasising general and abstract issues, the Internet allows netizens to focus on everyday worries and local issues – a decentralisation, which according to Charles Taylor, favours the widening of the political sphere (126). Ethan Zuckerman's 'cute cat theory of digital activism' further suggests that the restricting boundary, traditionally high in China, between an apolitical expression of an opinion and deliberate political activism is blurred in the online sphere (Shirkey 37). A recent survey supports the potency of online participation in engendering political interest and activism: 71% of Chinese microblog users attribute their growing interest in politics to microblogging while 59.3% have become more inclined to express political views on microblogs (Zhu).

[13] Outline in section "Participatory mechanisms and 'grassroots democratisation'".

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The main criticism[14] of e-democracy's effectiveness in furthering an active and informed citizenry is that of media censorship. The 'Four Unchangeable Policy' recently reaffirmed that "the Party's control of the media would not change…the Party's control over the ideological direction of media would not change", i.e. censorship will continue to define the media landscape (Bandurski, "The Four"). Nonetheless, the censorship's negative impact is arguably overemphasised due to a misconception of the Internet's function. Clay Shirkey proposes an 'environmental view' of the Internet's function: Its function lies in the long-term support of a civil society and public sphere rather than in inducing short-term political change. Crucial therefore is not the (non)access to specific information regulated via censorship but the ability to and process of communicating privately and socially via email, chat rooms, blogging forums, etc. Consequently the online participatory mechanisms' effect could resemble Habermas's conception of the printing press' effect in Europe – providing a space for discussion and agreement among politically active citizens (Shirkey 31-34).

An argument may be made that the Chinese censorship system in fact excerpts a positive influence on the development of an active citizenry in that the reactions against it strengthen the democratic culture. Democracy is at its core a *process* depending on the continued exercise of people's sovereignty for its sustenance. Ortega y Gasset cautioned that in Western *established democracies* a state of 'saturation' may lead to a mindset which considers the "material and social organisation" a "natural system" rather than "marvels of intention...which can only be maintained by great effort and foresight" (39-40). The resultant lack of political participation and activism is reflected in Kurbjuweit's description of Germany as an "undernourished democracy" and underlies the publication of Stéphane Hessel's novel *"Cry out".* In China constant irregularities and abuses, e.g. censorship, and the resulting public engagement render Hessel's clarion call for action unnecessary. The exceptionally high level of public interest in new supervisory channels attests to this: The Beijing Fire department's blog offering live multimedia reporting from fire scenes, which recently went online, had 105,000 followers after only one day while after one year the Beijing Police's blog had more than 1.5 million followers (Wu W.).
Besides the issue of censorship, two more substantial criticisms of e-democracy's potential are to be mentioned. On the one hand given their novelty, uncertainty is inevitable. As the editor-in-chief of a Chinese propaganda organ confirmed "[microblogs] definitely have enormous influence…we still have to gauge their ultimate influence" (Landwehr). On the other hand, online participatory mechanisms do "not inevitably lead to a broader and better public" (Vorländer). By lowering the boundaries for expression and facilitating the selective exposure to information confirming pre-existing beliefs, e-democracy could contribute to a culture with "no reason…for listening, but rather for judging, pronouncing [and] deciding" (Ortega 48).

Regarding the institutional reforms' potential, much criticism has been levelled at the grassroots voting process: The regular banning of independent candidates, e.g. the barring of an unemployed worker's bid to run for legislature in the city of Xinyu, Jiangxi province in May (Lam), and flagrant government manipulation of the electoral process, as in the first direct township election in Buyun, are two common charges. In 1998 the Buyun Township was to democratically elect a township head. Yet the Party Committee's nominee, who ultimately won the elections, was allowed to join the final round of the elections directly without having to pass through a week of campaigning and public questioning like the independent contenders (Schubert 8). However, in consequently dismissing the value of such reforms as "manipulative and undemocratic", for failing to "live up to Western standards calling for the right of

[14] Criticism commonly focuses on the Chinese e-democracy's unrepresentativeness, citing both a low Internet penetration (31.6% - Internet World Stats) and the unrepresentativeness of netizens. While this is a valid concern it is one which the rapid spread of technology is increasingly rectifying.

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organisational freedom" the deeper lying democratising effects are overseen (Schubert 9). In the aftermath of the independent candidacies, *The Beijing News* published a full page article detailing questions of eligibility, registration and nomination procedures, the electoral process, etc. – a groundbreaking dissemination of constitutional rights to a citizenry lacking such awareness (Bandurski, "Changing China"). In the Buyun case an 'unaltered leadership' now faced 'changed constituents', i.e. the (un)democratically elected township head faced a constituency politically informed and engaged by the discussions and debates. As O'Brien concludes, *rightful resistance* leveraging the institutional framework may be more consequential in furthering democratisation, i.e. an informed citizenry, than short term extra-institutional revolts (xii).

A democracy further requires citizen organisations to act as intermediaries between a government and the public. Citizen organisations were highlighted by Tocqueville as a cornerstone of the American democracy and the underlying civic participation: "Nothing, in my opinion, is more deserving of our attention than the intellectual and moral associations of America" (2:134). The political scientist Arthur Bentley noted that all politics and governance results from the activities of groups rather than the direct discourse with atomized individuals or 'the public' as a collective. In other words "Feelings and opinions are recruited…only by the reciprocal influence of men upon one another" (Tocqueville 2:132). Opinion and decision making is necessarily conveyed and shaped by civil society and civil organisations. This analysis is especially relevant to a deliberative democracy under the leadership of one pragmatic party, as here civic organisations have to replace competing parties in allowing a public sphere discussion to result in the forging of necessary compromises.

While the number of social organisations in China is rising, from 414,000 to 439,000 between 2009 and 2010 alone (Shan), China fundamentally lacks previous experience with citizen organisations. As Ying Songnian, professor at the China National School of Administration, pointed out: "China is embracing a multifaceted society, but there are not many mature interest groups representing a different voice" (Gong). The 2008 'Octopus mayor' case pointedly illustrated the debilitating effects of such a situation: In an attempt to demonstrate responsiveness, the mayor of Changzhi, Shanxi province resorted to distributing 960,000 name cards bearing his phone number, directly to the more than 3 million residents in case of work safety concerns. Critics remarked that "even if leaders morph into octopi they cannot possibly answer every phone call" (Bandurski, "Even if") thereby highlighting the indispensability of civic organisations acting as intermediaries.

Citizen organizations' development is supported by both the emergence of an e-democracy and the institutional reforms. The Internet may replace the traditional process of organisation building based on the top-down promulgation of a certain interest. Teresa Wright highlights that in a society with a high possibility of repression, common interests are an insufficient means of fostering the trust necessary for organisation forming. Bottom-up collaboration based on social networks, as supported by the Internet, may be the only viable basis for organization building (50). The online sphere fosters what Shirkey calls "shared awareness", whereby a situation is not only understood but it is understood that others share that understanding (35-36), i.e. it may create information hubs that encourage solidarity and collective claims.
As such the online participatory mechanisms, in contrast to the traditionally individual and solitary petitioning, may provide a collective reality founded on both social networks and common interests, a prerequisite for organisation building. The Internet's effectiveness is supported by numerous examples of online led associational activities: In 2011 the Nanjing Environmental NGO Green Stone successfully used an Internet platform and microblogs to ask people to collaborate and submit 'tree photos' so as to stop a plan to cut trees to make way for a subway construction. The online sparred activism subsequently led to

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the formation of an organisation consisting of NGOs, experts and members of the public, to reflect public wishes in the future (Meng). In a more publicised case, a former publication editor, Zhao Lianhai, organised parents affected by the 2008 Melamine Milk scandal via the website 'Kidney Stone Babies' (Jacobs).

Considering the potential impact of institutional reforms on the evolution of civic organisations the main concern is the "selective and insufficient representation of…views" due to the limited number of participants in legislative hearings (Horsley 5). The resultant mismatch between the represented interests and the 'popular interest' was highlighted by a 2005 legislative hearing in which 20 citizen-representatives unanimously voted for an electricity price hike, while online surveys showed that 80% of netizens opposed the proposal (Gong). But it may be argued that this shortcoming will only catalyze the formation of civic organisations as a means of guaranteeing the representation of wider interests in public hearings, in a similar manner to the petitioning system's inadvertent strengthening of 'group petitioning' (Xi).

Criticism of Chinese civic organisations' potential as a democratising force centres on the strong degree of government control over individual organisations via the dual-management system[15] as well as control over the NGO landscape, i.e. governmentally organized NGOS being promoted while political and advocacy organisations are suppressed. However, concepts such as "Dependent Autonomy" (Lu) and "Embedded Activism" (Ho 20) suggest a more complex relationship between the government and civic organisations, a "paradoxical" relationship "restrictive but conducive" (Ho 21). Central may not be the alignment with the government, but the degree to which organisations' missions and roles differ from the government. Even while lacking political influence and pursuing only pro-governmental agendas in areas where the government recognizes its shortcomings and has therefore accepted organisations' assistance, civic organisations represent "a clear and undeniable political statement: people are gaining control of their lives" (Ma 2). The democratising value of civic organisations is not dependent on their role as "vanguards of society battling state intrusion" (Ma 9) but on discourse and associational life, even if de-politicised and non-confrontational, taking place in the public sphere.

Finally, a democracy has to be founded on an *interest based* group identity. In China, influenced by Confucianism, group identities are traditionally derived from social relations. In a national context the shared history and culture of the 'civilization state' serves as the common identification, unifying a complexity of languages and regionalisms. The people's national identity as a 'family' is intimately tied to the government as the guardian of this unity and the patriarch. The public does not hold unifying identities separate from the 'national identity' - a necessary condition for democratisation. Pan Wei, a professor at the Peking University, explicated this using a metaphor: In absence of "clear and stable social cleavages", "Chinese society is just like a heap of scattered sand". In Western countries on the other hand, individuals derive their identity from a subsumption of various ethnic, religious, political and interest groupings – group identities are interest based. Constitutional patriotism, a notion adopted by Habermas, which may be contrasted with a civic patriotism evident in China, captures this: People are not united by a shared history or ethnicity but rather by the shared acceptance of "the norms, the values, and, more indirectly, the procedures of a liberal democratic constitution" alongside national borders (Müller 1). It is against this background that Wu Bangguo's warning that given multiparty elections China might "descend into an abyss of internal chaos" (Bao) with warring factions and resource draining political battles, has to be understood. "The mainland's unity would be imperilled without the continued existence of the Party", the sole common

[15] Under the *dual management system* government affiliation (and supervision) is a condition for a civil organisation's official registration.

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identification potential in the absence of a plurality of identification groupings (Oksenberg). From this standpoint the outlined intra-party opinion diversity, the institutional reforms and the online participatory mechanism take on a new and heightened significance. Their greatest contribution to the amelioration of China's 'democratic deficit' may be their most unnoticeable effect - the establishment of *interest based* group identities as a essential condition for China's democratisation.

So, is China democratising?

96% of Chinese support democracy as a "good way of governing a country" (Ren 133-134) and they overwhelmingly support democratic freedoms and rights (Harding).
A conclusive endorsement of a representative democratic system? Quite the contrary. Regarding the desirability of competitive elections and independent political institutions, Chinese are less enthusiastic (Harding).

In other words, China's democratisation can only be evaluated if its uniqueness, its unique state-society relationship and the nature of the Party are taken into account, while the differentiation between the universal value of 'people's sovereignty' and various instantiations of democracy is upheld. If western paradigms, focusing on multiparty elections, are universalised there is a risk that an "incremental building block approach" to democracy (Yu x) is dismissed and indigenous Chinese "democracy wave" debates[16] are ignored (Yu xviii). In adopting a framework of universal values and unique circumstances, a vision of a 'Chinese democracy' differing from the Western 'mass democracy' can be conceived without implying a dichotomous clash between the 'China model' and the 'Western model'. Adopting a deliberative democracy based system with the public as supervisors under a non-ideological party's leadership, as a standard, reveals an immature civil society rather than a lack of elections as the greatest barrier to China's democratisation. Evaluating the rise of intra-party opinion diversity, institutional reforms and the emergence of an e-democracy from this standpoint supports cautious optimism and suggests that it is the developments' indirect effects which are consequential.

To conclude, democratisation with an increasing role of the state – a paradox?
Can the seeming contradictions between the universal democratic value, Chinese culture and the present political topography give rise to a new form of democracy?
An analogy may be drawn with the conceptual emergence of the 'social market economy' in 1947. It too grew out of the realisation that existing ideologies did not accommodate the present situation, it too was seen as a paradox and it too managed to evolve into something new without departing from the old as a "supporting framework" (Hecking).

[16] Nation wide public discourses about democracy stimulated by Chinese scholars and the official media starting around 2005.

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