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Extending Political Participation in China: New Opportunities for Citizens in the Policy Process

Jane Duckett and Hua Wang

School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Glasgow, United Kingdom

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Correspondence address:

Scottish Centre for China Research

School of Social and Political Sciences

Adam Smith Building

University of Glasgow

GLASGOW, G12 8RT

United Kingdom

Corresponding author: Professor Jane Duckett, jane.duckett@glasgow.ac.uk.

Biographical notes

Jane Duckett is Edward Caird Chair of Politics at the University of Glasgow and Director of the Scottish Centre for China Research.

Hua WANG is a doctoral student in the School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Glasgow.

Extending Political Participation in China: New Opportunities for Citizens in the Policy Process¹

Authoritarian political systems are portrayed as offering few opportunities for citizens to participate in politics – particularly in the policy process. This paper’s contribution is to set out new mechanisms that enable Chinese citizens to evaluate government performance, contribute to decision making, shape policy agendas and feed back on implementation. Based on fieldwork in the city of Hangzhou, we argue that the local party-state orchestrates citizen participation the policy process, but members of the public nevertheless do have influence. Political participation is widening in China, but it is still controlled. It is not yet clearly part of a process of democratization, but it does establish the principle of citizen rights to oversee government.

Keywords: China, citizens, political participation, policy process

In their classic study of American politics, Sidney Verba and Norman H. Nie (1972) defined political participation as behaviour designed to affect the choice of governmental personnel or policies. Across a range of other democracies, too, such behaviour has been shown to take these forms, with a great deal of political science research devoted to the study of voting as well as governmental and societal influences on policy. Research on authoritarian political systems, however, has long portrayed participation as more limited. Most obviously, citizens have no opportunity to vote because governments and leaders are unelected, and societal influences on policy making are constrained by lack of freedom of association and expression (Linz 2000, Brooker 2011). In some systems, including pre-1980s China and the Soviet Union, as well as contemporary North Korea, participation has been seen as almost entirely organized by communist party-states in ‘mass mobilization’ efforts and political campaigns

(Townsend 1967). Although some researchers did identify distinct interest groups in these politics (Skilling & Griffiths 1971, Skilling 1983, Goodman 1984, Falkenheim 1987), groups outside of the party-state's machinery were thought to have little policy influence. Policy making was instead dominated by the bureaucracy or individual leaders and political factions (e.g. Skilling 1966, Barnett 1967, MacFarquhar 1974). Even in the 1980s, research on the policy process showed bureaucratic actors – especially those at national and provincial level – dominating agenda setting and policy formulation (Lieberthal and Oksenberg 1988, Lieberthal 1992), while local state actors shaped policies during implementation (Lampton 1992).

In late 1980s fieldwork, however, Tianjian Shi identified new ways in which Chinese citizens were able to participate in politics – usually at the local or workplace level (where in the planned economy the workplace was a state institution). Shi showed that they voted in local people's congress elections and in leadership elections for work units and villages, and they helped candidates campaign in local-level elections – even if these did not involve a great deal of competition. Shi also argued that ordinary people's political participation in the policy process was – unlike in democracies – limited to the implementation stage and often took an individualized (rather than interest group) form (Shi 1997, pp. 9–10). He showed how people engaged in particularistic activities – directly appealing to their workplace leaders, lodging complaints or writing letters to newspaper editors – with the aim of shaping how policies were implemented. They also adopted unauthorized or semi-authorized modes of collective participation, such as organizing or joining strikes, slowdowns and demonstrations – again aimed at dealing with perceived injustices arising from policies after they were implemented. In documenting these latter activities, Shi was part of a growing number of researchers in the field of comparative politics who extended the definition of

political participation, often to include non-authorized forms such as strikes and protests (see Conge 1988).²

Since the late 1980s, China researchers have identified further transformations to political participation. First, they have shown that although citizens are no closer to voting directly for their national leaders and decision makers, they often are able to influence the choice of village and urban resident committee leaders (see Schubert and Ahlers 2012). Village election practices have improved so that villagers have some choice over candidates, and elections have been extended to urban residents' committees and to some township people's congresses (Manion 2000, O'Brien & Han 2009, He 2010). Second, researchers have sought to track and explain the escalating use of non-authorized participation such as protests and demonstrations, riots and strikes, as well as ordinary people's petitioning behaviour (e.g. Cai 2008, O'Brien 2008, Paik 2011, Li, Liu and O'Brien 2012). Third, a great deal of scholarly effort has focussed on how Chinese people began in the 1990s to set up and participate in non-governmental organizations, and how these organizations, alongside think tanks, businesses and the media have influenced policy (Kennedy 2005, Guo 2007, Mertha 2009, Zhu 2011). Finally and most recently, work has begun to show how political participation has shifted online as netizens help shape policy agendas and decisions through opinions voiced in internet chatrooms and microblogs (e.g. Yang 2011).³

Clearly, political participation has changed in China. But research has concentrated on local elections, unauthorized activities, and the opportunities presented by new technologies, rather than on local initiatives to involve citizens in the policy process. The exceptions are studies that have examined local experiments across China with consultative mechanisms such as public (administrative and legislative) hearings and workshops, and online consultations over draft laws and administrative rules and regulations, where citizens can express opinions before policy decisions are taken (Zhong and Mol 2008, Horsley 2009).

Other studies have analyzed experiments with deliberative polling, where a representative group, randomly sampled, expresses its view and chooses from a selection of possible local infrastructure projects (Fishkin et al. 2010, He and Thøgersen 2010).

So far unexplored, however, are government initiatives that involve citizens in evaluating local government departments' performance, participating in government decision making meetings, and creating public platforms for local citizens to voice their opinions on policies and social problems. This paper's contribution therefore is to show how local governments in China are encouraging these new forms of participation in the policy making process. Based on research in the city of Hangzhou in China's southern Zhejiang province, we describe and assess new mechanisms adopted for encouraging political participation. We do not claim that what we describe in Hangzhou is widespread across China. In fact Hangzhou has pioneered many initiatives and in 2010 won a local government innovation prize for opening up its decision making (Wang 2010). Hangzhou officials also claimed that their citizen evaluation system had been the first in the country, though it was now found elsewhere. Thus while not representative, the Hangzhou Party-state's innovations may be leading the way nationally in promoting citizen participation.

We conducted fieldwork in Hangzhou between 2010 and 2012, gathering government documents and interviewing officials involved in devising and coordinating citizen participation. We also met journalists and local scholars involved in delivering or researching the participatory activities that we discuss below.⁴ On this basis we set out the mechanisms through which the Hangzhou party-state has encourage political participation, focussing in particular on three new dimensions of citizen involvement in the policy process. While citizens in Hangzhou have not been given a role in selecting government personnel and cannot remove leaders through elections if they are unhappy with their policies or performance, they do have the opportunity to evaluate local government departments'

performance and policies.⁵ They also, as the result of a series of measures under the rubric of ‘open style decision making’, have given citizens a voice in government meetings and an opportunity to comment in advance on government work plans. Finally, the local government has created a range of platforms using traditional and new media that enable citizens to voice their opinions on local issues and problems (thereby influencing the policy agenda), and debate publicly with each other as well as with government officials and ‘experts’. These mechanisms help citizens shape policy agendas, inform and influence decision making, and provide policy feedback to modify existing policies, and so involve citizens through different stages of the policy process. They are more than simply a deliberative or consultative mechanism because they not only involve consulting citizens on particular policies or budgets but also enable them to evaluate government performance, sit in on government meetings that discuss a wide range of policies, and influence policy agendas.

We argue that government-led changes in citizen participation are transforming the nature of local policy making in China. While the policy process remains bureaucratically dominated, participation has been extended beyond the realm of the bureaucracy, think tanks, businesses, non-governmental organizations and the media. The local party-state has opened up policy making to citizen participation and ‘authorized’ popular participation for a number of reasons, including improving the quality of decision making, pre-empting protest over unpopular policies, and legitimizing policy decisions. It still carefully orchestrates citizen involvement, however, even though its mechanisms do resemble efforts in some democracies to extend participation and local officials do sometimes claim that the mechanisms are democratic.⁶

Participation in the policy process in Hangzhou

Hangzhou municipal party and government organizations began to innovate with new forms of political participation from May 1999 (Wang 2010). Since then, the city has gradually institutionalized citizen evaluations of government performance and policies, allowed citizens a greater role in ‘open-style decision making’, and extended citizens’ ability to raise issues, make complaints and discuss policies in the local media – whether through televised debates or local online forums. We discuss each of these below. However, the mechanisms we discuss are not the only ones that Hangzhou has introduced. There are several others that we have not had the space to include. These include individual departments’ use of public hearings, as well as a much publicized initiative to use Neighbourhood Offices – local arms of urban district governments – to solicit policy suggestions and feedback from residents (Fan et al. 2009). The Hangzhou party-state has also set up ‘Urban brand netgroups’ (*chengshi pinpai wangqun*) as a platform for people to participate in promoting Hangzhou and its industries and to improve quality of life across the city. The groups organize or coordinate events bringing together people from across government, media, research institutions, enterprises and NGOs, as well as involving individual citizens (Interview 2, 17 June 2011; see also Fang and Ma 2013).

Evaluating government performance: controlled accountability

An important and well-resourced Hangzhou party-state initiative has gradually introduced mechanisms to evaluate the performance of government departments. In 1999, the city set up China’s first ‘12345’ mayor open telephone line, then in 2000 it created a mechanism for citizens to appraise – and convey their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with – government work, establishing a ‘Satisfaction Office’ (*manyi ban*) to gather opinions. This work evolved over

the subsequent years into system for incorporating citizen views into the performance evaluations of government departments. By early 2012, the citizen ‘examination and evaluations’ (*kaoping*) system was used across 117 government departments and urban districts with the involvement each year of around 15,000 people: 10,000 residents (*shimin*), 2000 ‘system insiders’ (*tixi nei*) such as party, local people’s congress representatives and people’s political consultative conference (PPCC) members, plus 1200 enterprise representatives, and (since 2007) 1000 rural migrant workers. Rural residents were included from 2009, when the evaluation system was extended from the city government to its suburban district and counties, and then NGO members were involved from 2011. As the evaluations became institutionalized, the Hangzhou Municipal Party Committee adjusted the organizational set-up. In August 2006 it created an Examination and Evaluation Office (*kaoping ban*, hereafter, ‘EEO’) to handle his work, merging into it the Satisfaction Office, a Target Office (*mubiao ban*) in the Municipal Government Office (*bangongting*), as well as the Party Committee’s Efficacy Office (*xiaoneng ban*) (Interview 11, 21 March 2012). The EEO has a staff of 15 people and reports directly to both the Municipal Party Committee and the Municipal Government Office (Interview 11, 21 March 2012).

Citizen participants in the evaluation system are selected in different ways. Officials reported that it was relatively easy to get ‘system insiders’ to participate but to capture those ‘outside the system’ (*tizhi wai*) they conduct household survey (*ruhu diaocha*). The survey uses stratified random sampling, with interview teams going into communities and interviewing every 50th household. The survey responses are anonymized and representative by gender (Interview 11, 21 March 2012). From 2009, the government also – when the survey was being conducted in December – allowed citizens to submit evaluations online (on the government’s website or by telephone), and this was open to all (Tong 2009, Liu 2012).

In the survey, citizens are invited to evaluate departments as: ‘satisfied’, ‘quite satisfied’, ‘basically satisfied’, ‘not very satisfied’, or ‘not satisfied’, with 100, 80, 60, 30 and 0 points accorded respectively to each of these evaluations. An average ‘social evaluation’ is then calculated and it contributes to 50 per cent of a department’s final overall evaluation, with performance against concrete targets contributing 45 per cent, and leaders’ evaluations contributing 5 per cent.⁷ Departments can also choose to be evaluated on their ‘innovation and creativity’ for a further 3 percentage points. Officials reported that about 80 per cent of departments attain the ‘satisfactory’ target (Interview 3, 17 June 2011; Hangzhou Evaluation Office website 2013). As well as asking people to score government departments’ performances using a percentage scale, the EEO also leaves room for people to volunteer opinions, and it specifically asks questions about particular – often contentious – issues. When analyzing these opinions, the EEO tries to identify the most significant issues for the local government. According to an official working in the EEO:

We look for issues on which there are many opinions and the views are strong, and then we report these issues to the relevant government departments. The government department must then say how it will deal with the issue and at the end of the year report on what it has done (Interview 11, 21 March 2012).

Issues of widespread concern over recent years included unemployment, land use, schools for migrant children, health care and traffic problems (Interview 11, 21 March 2012).

The EEO collates citizen evaluations and then sends them to the government departments that are being assessed. The evaluations influence the overall evaluations of the bureaux (rather than individuals in them), and so the bureau chiefs take them seriously (Interview 6, 19 March 2012). If for two successive years a department does not reach its

satisfaction target, the leader will be removed or reassigned elsewhere. Officials reported for example that in 2003 the chief of the Food and Drug Bureau had resigned because his department received the lowest evaluations across the local government. EEO staff reported also that a Real Estate and Urban Construction bureau chief demanding better performance from subordinates and other departments significantly improving their performance following poor evaluations (Interview 7, 19 March 2012; Interview 2, 21 March 2012). Although the citizen survey results are published only in restricted access documents (*neibu wenjian*), the final overall evaluations are published in the media (Interview 3, 17 June 2011).

Officials reported several examples of policy change resulting directly from the citizen evaluation process. For example, there had been much public concern about the danger of public buses not giving pedestrians right of way. The EEO had written a report (as it does for every department, summarizing the social evaluations) to the Transport Bureau, which then changed public transport rules accordingly. Another example related to public complaints that the Land and Resource Bureau (*guotu ziyuan ju*) took too long to process land use certificates. After this report was given to the bureau, they reorganized their procedures so that it took only 30 minutes to complete all the procedures. This case in turn influenced the Real Estate Management Bureau (*fangguanju*), which improved its efficiency in handling applications for certificates relating to property use and rentals. In a third example, the EEO found citizens were concerned about the problem faced by two popular independent bookshops that were struggling to compete with online booksellers. The EEO reported this to the relevant city government departments, which gave the bookshops subsidies and tax breaks (Interview 11, 21 March 2012).

Citizen evaluations of government performance have the potential to influence local bureau chief appointments and promotions, but are analyzed by the party-state's EEO before being published, and as such are at best a controlled form of accountability to a cross-section

of Hangzhou's citizenry. Although interviewees reported cases of officials being moved or feeling pressure, ultimately the process lacked transparency and the EEO that conducted the analysis lacked independence from the local Party Committee and government. The local party-state nevertheless had invested considerable resource in the citizen examination and evaluation process, which had become more formalized and institutionalized over the 12 years since it was introduced. Why had they done this? According to the website of the EEO, the city party committee and government introduced citizen evaluations from 2000 in order to tackle 'the four difficulties' (*si nan*) relating to government departments: 'getting in the door, seeing a face, getting heard and getting things done' (Hangzhou City Evaluation Office 2013b). Interviews with both the EEO itself as well as with the local Party Committee and local government officials tasked with implementing the evaluations system indicated that they saw this citizen participation as helping improve the performance of government departments and increase their 'service orientation'. It had become an important adjunct to internal performance systems. As a scholar in the Zhejiang Party School put it, 'the EEO is an important mechanism for supervizing government' (Interview 8, 19 March, 2012).

Participating in Decision Making

'Open style government'

In 2006, the Hangzhou party-state took an early step in opening up government decision making when it set up a Decision Making Advisory Committee (*juece zixun weiyuanhui*). Its aim was to improve expert input, technical advice and decision evaluation systems relating to the making of major government decisions (Weng 2006). The Committee was an expert body made up of scholars from local universities and research institutes such as the Academy of Social Sciences. Soon after, Hangzhou City Government (2007) issued a notice requiring districts and counties (or county-level cities) to 'widely listen to the opinions of the mass of

the people and different social spheres, as well as conscientiously gather opinions from members of democratic parties, people's congress representatives, political consultative congress members and mass organizations' on issues that 'concerned people's interests'. This same notice also began to permit citizens, experts, People's Congress representatives and Political Consultative Conference members to attend city government meetings (Wang 2010). It was followed in 2008, by a decision to enable citizens to actually participate in meetings, and to telecast those meetings live online alongside a facility for people to comment promptly on issues being discussed (Wang 2010; see Hangzhou Direct Broadcast website 2013).

In 2008, the City Government also published and sought feedback on its draft work report in advance of the annual meeting of the Municipal People's Congress, and it sought opinions from the public after the meeting. In March 2009, it published drafts of its 'three big reports' – the Government Work Report, the Planning Report on National Economic and Social Development, and the Fiscal Report – for public consultation one month in advance of the annual local People's Congress and Consultative Conference meetings (Wang 2010). The Government Work Report was reportedly amended to include citizens' suggestions, including those about improving health insurance payment systems, strengthening maternal and child health work and improving property management in old districts. Public feedback on planning issues concentrated on public transport lines, facilities in new housing developments, overall planning of urban and rural regional development, social security of migrant workers, and improving urban ecology and environment, and these were incorporated into the Planning Report. The Fiscal Report, meanwhile, adopted suggestions about low-cost housing subsidies, investment in tourist facilities, issuance of consumer coupons, state assets management, mechanisms for attracting human talent, and social security (Wang 2010).

Also in 2009, Hangzhou City Government issued formal 'Regulations on implementing open-style decision making procedures in major administrative matters of

Hangzhou People's Government' (Hangzhou City Government 2009). These Regulations standardized the implementing principles and procedures for open style government decision making. They *required* for example that government Standing Committee meeting discussions of major policies should be broadcast. Since then 'open style government decision making' has been gradually extended further, into Hangzhou's 13 district level (county and city) governments (Wang 2010).

'Red House' Consultations

At the same time as making more transparent the city government's decision making, and allowing citizens to observe and participate in its meetings, the Hangzhou party-state created a physical space to enable citizens to give their opinions on major local construction proposals. Since May 2006, it has organized 'Red House Consultations' (*honglou wenji*), using a one-hundred year old red brick building – the 'Red House' – that is a cultural landmark in the city centre. This building hosts a museum and a 713m² exhibition space that is used for public consultations – reportedly on *all* major local planning issues (Chen 2011). City construction departments display information about proposed plans: such as a new car park development or road, and visitors are invited to fill in a questionnaire and leave their opinions and suggestions. The consultations are advertized in the local media, and usually last at least seven days. From 2009, information – diagrams, maps and photographs – have also been put on the official Hangzhou local website 'Hangzhou Web Discussion Hall' (*hangwang yishiting*) so that citizens can submit comments online. By 2009, the Red House had hosted 68 public displays, visited by 346,000 visitors who had completed 14,000 feedback forms (Chen 2011).

The Red House Consultations are described in official accounts as a bridge between government and people and a platform for their interaction with the aim of merging and

optimizing societal resources. Opinions are reportedly ‘carefully collated’ used to improve the city’s construction programmes, as well as ‘get as much understanding, participation and support as possible from ordinary people’ (Chen 2011). In interviews, officials reported that the advantage of involving citizens in the planning and decision making process was that it could help pre-empt opposition from residents by allowing them to feed in objections at this stage rather than during or after projects were implemented (Interview 4, 18 June 2011).

While the way that feedback is collated and evaluated are not transparent, the main motivation for the consultations seems to be to solicit ideas and to ascertain whether there are high levels of public opposition to planning projects.

Participating in new media forums

Online discussion forums

As well as involving citizens in the evaluation of government officials and departments, and in government meetings, the Hangzhou party-state has created a number of media forums – and the internet in particular – where citizens to publicly discuss and engage with policy makers over local policies and issues. The core platform for this activity is the website ‘Hangzhou Web Discussion Hall’ (hereafter ‘the Discussion Hall’, <http://hwyst.hangzhou.com.cn>), an important part of the wider Hangzhou city website, Hangzhou Net (*Hangzhou wang*, www.hangzhou.com.cn), which is physically operated from the ‘Citizens’ Centre’, a hub for government provision of public services. The Discussion Hall was set up in late December 2009 by the Hangzhou Party Committee and Government Office, the Propaganda Department and the Hangzhou Daily Group (Hangzhou Party Committee and Government, 2009). It receives about six million hits each day, and has over 20 people working in its offices (with over 130 people working on the wider Hangzhou Net).⁸

The Discussion Hall is an umbrella for Red House Consultations and for televised debates on social problems and policies on the local programme ‘Our Roundtable’ (see below), both of which have prominent pages on the site. Red House Consultation exhibitions are duplicated on the site, through which people can submit their opinions, while Our Roundtable programmes are posted on the site. But the Discussion Hall is also a discussion and participation forum in itself. Its main pages encourage citizens to discuss hot topics, interact online with officials, make suggestions and register complaints, ask questions and give opinions. It allows people to raise issues – potentially to set the policy agenda or contribute to getting issues on the policy agenda – as well as comment or feedback on plans (Interview 10, 20 March 2012). The site is used in the run-up to the annual People’s Congress meetings to collect the public’s views and pass them on to government departments, who are required to respond. Opinions are also passed to the departments that evaluate officials’ performance (*zhengji*), and some views are reported to the city’s leaders as confidential reports (*neican*). Some simpler requests for advice and help are responded to by journalists.

Formally, the Discussion Hall’s goals are to provide a platform for ‘democracy and to promote people’s livelihood’ and ‘become a large door between party committee, government and the masses’. Its website says that that it is ‘an important channel for orderly participation in politics by the mass of the people’ (Hangzhou Web Discussion Hall 2009). In interviews, however, officials noted that it also served ‘to help government decisions and help people solve problems’ (Interview 10, 20 March 2012). Officials also reported that it functioned as a mechanism for ‘feeding back citizens’ feelings’, which people could express on the site, and which would be collated and passed on to the authorities. It thus allows the local party-state to analyze popular sentiment and hot topics. But it also enables the party-state to ‘manage’ opinion, with functions including ‘to lead popular sentiment by enabling

departments and experts to give specialist guidance’, as well as ‘to relieve doubts and explain uncertainties’ (Interview 1, 14 October, 2010).

Participation through televised debates

One of the most significant platforms for citizens to set policy agendas and shape decision making uses the more traditional medium of television. In December 2010, Hangzhou television station began broadcasting the programme, ‘Our Roundtable’ (*women de yuanzhuohui*) each evening, Monday to Friday, at the prime time of 8—8.30pm following the Hangzhou television news (Interview 5, 19 June 2011). On the programme, five or six people, a mix of Hangzhou residents, local officials and ‘experts’ discuss local social issues. By March 2012, when we conducted our final fieldwork trip, over 200 programmes had been broadcast and then posted on the Hangzhou Internet Discussion Hall website’s pages, where they remained accessible there for viewing (see Our Roundtable web pages 2013).⁹ The programme makers reported that according their own viewing figures an average of eight per cent of viewers watched this programme, though a market survey had found the figure to be between three and five per cent (Interview 12, 21 March 2012).

The topics for each programme are chosen by a 10-person programme team: five people employed by the television station and five seconded from the city Party Committee’s offices. This group proposes topics to be discussed on the programme, taking into consideration public concerns expressed on the Discussion Hall web pages. Proposed topics are then passed to the Party Committee’s Office, which examines and approves them, and also approves programmes for airing after they have been made.

The programme team chooses a mix of participants that usually include officials, experts and ordinary citizens who either have an interest in the particular programme’s topic or are directly affected by it. They select citizen participants from among people who have

posted suggestions or complaints on the Discussion Hall website, as well as from a pool of people registered in the Citizens' Centre as 'citizens' representatives'. When they finalize the topic, they also open a phone line where people can call in with comments on that topic, and they select some participants from that pool (Interview 12, 21 March 2012).

City officials described the programme as beneficial in the context of 'social contradictions', enabling people to discuss social issues and 'give ideas to government' (Li Yong, 19 November 2011). According to these officials, the programme has become a popular means for people to set out their views and so its influence had grown. They claimed that 'good suggestions' were reported to government departments via the Party Office's News Section, and even on occasion to the Mayor and City Party Secretary, and so programme participants could sometimes influence government policy. As an example, the programme had run a series of five programmes on traffic problems in the city – a source of regular complaints from the public. Discussions on the programme resulted in the local government abandoning a plan to restrict traffic on overpasses, because there was a good deal of opposition, while other rush hour restrictions went ahead because they were more acceptable. In this case, the Transport Bureau had drafted proposals to deal with rush hour traffic, which it opened for consultation on the government's web pages in August 2012. 'Our Roundtable' aired three programmes that same month to discuss the proposals, and then another two programmes in November 2012 to discuss views on their implementation since October. In another case, two programmes were aired in April 2012 on the problem of buses not giving way to pedestrians. This helped get the issue on the agenda, and resulted in policy makers tackling and remedying the problem. Meanwhile another programme raised the problem of bicycle parks in the government's free bicycle scheme taking up exercise space in public parks, and so alternative spaces were found to put the bicycles (Interview 6, 19 March 2012).

As well as sometimes enabling citizens to get issues on the agenda and express their views on social problems or policies, 'Our Roundtable' helps them play a 'watchdog' role. Problems raised on the programme are taken to the relevant government departments to deal with. A specially-designated journalist writes a report to the news section of the Municipal Party Committee Office. In some cases, a government department leader will return and 'report' on progress for viewers – who may have requested feedback. On some issues, however, department officials are willing to return to the programme to report on difficulties implementing policies because it helps relieve the pressure of expectation on them. The programme also allows the government – which plays a role in deciding the content or topic of programmes – to defend policies or explain difficulties in solving problems.

But Our Roundtable programmes are not simply vehicles for defending government policy. One programme, for example, enabled citizens to push forward an agenda of less fettered participation. In January 2012, citizens discussed on-air the mechanisms for selecting 'citizen representatives'. Current practice was for the government-run Citizens' Centre (*shimin zhi jia*), a one-stop-shop through which the government and its departments provide services and information, and the base for Hangzhou Net and the Discussion Hall, to select representatives from among volunteers, contributors to online forums and chatrooms, and from nominations by community cadres, enterprises and NGOs. In 2012, for example, 203 such representatives provided a pool of people to attend government Standing Committee and People's Congress meetings and to evaluate specific government projects. Participants in the televised discussion on Our Roundtable, however, challenged this approach – and indeed the entire notion of having representatives – saying that they did not want to be 'represented' and would prefer to convey their views directly through referendums and the use of electronic voting ('Our Roundtable', 10 and 11 January 2012).

Conclusion: controlled citizen participation -- a step toward democratization?

Hangzhou's many citizen participation mechanisms are often closely connected. Indeed part of Hangzhou's innovation in citizen participation is the way that it has woven together many different mechanisms. As an example, public concerns with specific traffic problems and the plight of independent bookshops were identified through both the EEO survey and Discussion Hall postings, and they were then the subject of programmes aired on 'Our Roundtable'. They have also been fed into government reports and discussions. Meanwhile, citizen participants on both Our Roundtable and in government Standing Committee meetings are often drawn from a single pool of 'citizen representatives'.

Hangzhou's local party-state – the city Party Committee working closely with the government and local Development Research Centre – has through the gradual proliferation of multiple mechanisms created and then sustained the city's momentum in opening up the policy process. In doing so, it is in part responding to central Party calls for greater participation. In 2007, for example, Chinese Communist Party General Secretary Hu Jintao in his report to the 17th National Party Congress, said that there was a need 'to adapt to the growing enthusiasm of the people for participation in political affairs' (Hu 2007, see also Shu 2008):

We must ensure that all power of the state belongs to the people, expand the citizens' orderly participation in political affairs at each level and in every field, and mobilize and organize the people as extensively as possible to manage state and social affairs as well as economic and cultural programs in accordance with the law.

And in 2008, the State Council issued a Decision promoting public participation (Horsley 2009).¹⁰ Hu (2012) then, in his report to the 18th Party Congress in 2012, used the language of principle as well as pragmatism when he urged 'improving deliberation and consultation

on public affairs, and strengthening oversight of the exercise of power, to ensure that the people have greater and more tangible democratic rights’.

Following this lead, local leaders have also stated their goals in principled terms. Hangzhou Mayor Cai Qi is reported to have said that ‘matters relating to ordinary people should all be open. Ordinary people have the right to know what the government is doing and even more right to participate in what the government is doing’ (Shu 2008). In interviews, local officials charged with pushing forward all these initiatives spoke of them as ‘democratic’ mechanisms.

But local party and government officials revealed other reasons for introducing – and committing so much resource to – these major initiatives. They felt it helped improve policies and encouraged government departments to be more service-oriented, effectively adding a level of scrutiny and government oversight. They were also motivated by a desire to reduce conflict and protest – part of efforts to promote a ‘harmonious society’ – by getting negative feedback on policies as they were formulated and in ongoing government ‘conversations’ with citizens over problems and policy solutions even after implementation (Interview 1, 14 October 2010). This served not only to reduce the chance of protest when policies were being implemented, but also to legitimize individual policy decisions.

The new mechanisms are also of course partly motivated by the more general legitimization that citizen participation provides to the local Party-state. Officials wanted citizen participation to build people’s identities as Hangzhou residents, with ‘Hangzhou’ a collective that included both people and government (Interview 12, 20 March 2012). At the same time, officials said they hoped that participatory mechanisms would build trust and understanding (Interview 9, 19 March 2012). Local Party officials argued that platforms like Our Roundtable: ‘... reduce the gap between Party-state and people. People can also see how difficult the government’s job is’ (Interview 13, 20 March 2012).

Underpinning both central and local government efforts to promote participation is, therefore, a perception that the job of government is difficult – and getting more difficult all the time. The State Council’s Development Research Centre had reportedly visited Hangzhou to look at its participatory innovations because it was interested in ways of dealing with increasingly complex economies – those with an expanding private sector – and rising social expectations in rich coastal cities (Interview 13, 21 March 2012). Hangzhou is one of the most affluent, urbanized and industrialized cities in China: in 2010, the city’s per capita gross domestic product (GDP) for registered residents was 86,642 *yuan* – over US\$10,000, and at the level of some affluent nations; most residents – 6.2 million of its 8.8 million population – lived in its urban districts; and agriculture contributed only 3.5 per cent of its GDP (Interview 3, 17 June 2011).¹¹ Perhaps just as importantly, however, Hangzhou’s economy is predominantly private sector.¹² The Development Research Centre sees it as at the leading edge of socio-economic development in China and its political innovations as providing important lessons and potential national models for the future.

What then is the significance of the Hangzhou innovations? Clearly, they extend participation beyond the 1980s the work unit-based, individualized activities that Tianjian Shi found in Beijing. This is unsurprising given the declining importance in Hangzhou of state work units as small and medium-sized private enterprises have grown. But the city’s innovations have also broadened policy making beyond the realm of the bureaucracy, think tanks and experts, businesses, non-governmental organizations and the media. And they involve citizens at all stages of the policy process: from getting issues on the agenda through making decisions and feeding back on implementation and performance.

But do Hangzhou’s new participatory innovations – phenomena not previously associated with authoritarian political systems – constitute a significant political development and even a step toward democratization in China? At present participation has been initiated

and controlled by the local Party-state, which plays a role from selecting citizen representatives to approving televised debates before they are broadcast, and it seems to be aimed at preserving the political status quo. But participation is now institutionalized (in Hangzhou at least) and may help shape next steps both by establishing participatory principles and by reducing officials' fears of relinquishing control. Citizens are now authorized to participate in shaping the decisions that affect them, and public statements by both national and local leaders support the principle of citizen oversight of government and their democratic right to do so. They may therefore establish a foundation for claims to a more independent role. As people's outspoken (and televised) rejection of citizen representatives in Hangzhou indicates, demands for greater participation may not be easily assuaged and may induce further concessions. At the same time, a gradual opening up of government to citizen participation may reduce local officials' fears of losing control and demonstrated to them the benefits of handing over some responsibilities. While the new participatory mechanisms therefore may be designed to buttress the current political system, they are part of a process of gradual political reform whose trajectory is as yet uncertain.

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Notes

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² Here I draw also on Jayasuriya and Rodan (2007) to distinguish authorized and non-authorized forms of participation.

³ It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the reasons for these changes, but the work unit has eroded and so is no longer a prime site for citizens to engage in politics, while technological developments have clearly opened up new sites.

⁴ We have anonymized our interview sources when citing them in this paper, but details are available on request.

⁵ The Hangzhou party-state has not introduced direct elections of the city's leaders or government decision makers – a key dimension of political participation identified in the earliest studies of democracies – but it did in 2004 introduced a new, more rigorous and transparent procedures for selecting local officials at the bureau chief level. By 2012, more than 110 posts were open to input by 'experts' and local party congress representatives and political consultative conference members, rather than, as in standard practice across China, by the local Party Organization Department. The city's Party Committee did, however, retain decision making power over individual posts.

⁶ Participatory mechanisms adopted in many democracies in recent years have been aimed – much as they have in Hangzhou – at improving policy making and building political trust; and they have encountered similar difficulties in ensuring participation from across the societal spectrum (see for example Cornwall, no date).

⁷ 'Leaders' evaluations' are conducted by the department in charge (*shangji bumen*) of that which is being evaluated. After it was extended to the rural counties and suburban districts, the evaluation system there worked in different proportions, with 65% of the overall score derived from performance

against targets, 30% from the social evaluation, and 5% from the leaders' evaluation. A creativity and innovation score contributed a further 5%.

⁸ The site also channels complaints to Letters and Visits departments that are a longer-standing part of government designed to handling public complaints and communications. Officials reported that its online service the response time for citizens registering problems was 5—7days, that in 2011 there were 3,466 web-based service (*wangshang fuwu*) responses, and in 2012, 4,911 responses.

⁹ Many of the programmes aired since December 2010 are available for viewing on these web pages.

¹⁰ 'State Council Decision Concerning Strengthening Administration in Accordance with the Law of Municipal and County Government'. Horsley also notes that the 2008 Urban and Rural Planning law required draft plans to be published for comment for not less than 30 days, and the opinions received to be set out in a report when the draft plan is submitted for approval – though this is after Hangzhou began its Red House Consultations.

¹¹ Manufacturing contributes 44 per cent, and tertiary industries 48.7 per cent.

¹² Hangzhou's four main industries (electronic information, machinery, silk textiles and foodstuffs), make up 60% of the city's industry and involve mainly small enterprises (Interview 3, 17 June 2011).