Building Whole-Process People's Democracy in China

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Introduction

In Minzhu Village, a small community in the Jiulongpo District of the sprawling metropolis of Chongqing, a remarkable transformation has taken place. Once a maze of crumbling buildings and narrow, muddy roads, Minzhu Village is now a modern community with radiant red-brick walls, landscaped paths, and thriving public services. It has a sustainable farmers' market built with recycled materials, a public canteen that provides free meals for the elderly, fitness parks, stages for public performances, modern and affordable cafes, and a craft-beer bar housed in stacked shipping containers. On the main square, across from the three-story canteen, the Communist Party of China (CPC) operates a sleek public office, where residents can seek the support of Party cadres on anything from repainting their homes to resolving neighbourly disputes. Just a few years ago, sewage ran through a canal down the length of the main thoroughfare. Children and the elderly now dip their feet in the stream that has taken its place.

Minzhu Village once housed one of China's most important enterprises: the State-Owned Chongqing Construction Machine Tool Factory (国营建设机床厂).

The factory traces its roots back to the Hanyang Arsenal (汉阳兵工厂), a major producer of arms during the Qing Dynasty. During the Second Sino-Japanese war, the Hanyang Arsenal was moved to Jiulongpo District and, in 1957, officially renamed the Machine Tool Factory. This factory became one of China's largest military enterprises, producing semi-automatic rifles and submachine guns. At its peak, the factory employed over 20,000 workers, and Minzhu Village was constructed to house them. Built in the style of Soviet apartment blocks and in red-orange brick, the Village came to embody the period of rapid industrialization and change that swept the country.

In 2009, the Machine Tool Factory was relocated to the Huaxi Industrial Park in Banan District as part of a new policy on urban redevelopment. Already weathered and worn, Minzhu Village began to decline. Its infrastructure decayed and its population aged and dwindled. Officials considered demolishing the village and relocating its residents. But the community had generational bonds to the area, which itself held historic significance for the country. Instead of demolition, the village underwent a comprehensive program of regeneration. It became a model for the rest of the country — and provided a striking example of participatory processes in China's development. Following the launch of an urban-renewal pilot program in 2021, the CPC organized hundreds of "courtyard meetings" in Minzhu Village — community gatherings held in the public square, where residents aired grievances, voiced opinions, and shared ideas for the neighbourhood's redevelopment. Mailbox No. 1, a mailbox originally set up in 1953 as a communication channel for workers of the Machine Tool Factory, was digitized and expanded into a formal program collecting thousands of suggestions from residents. And a station was set up to facilitate public surveys at all levels of the community — further extending the role of the mailbox.

Today, parts of Minzhu Village recall hip corners of London or Berlin. But the neighborhood's transformation followed a different path to what often occurs in the metropoles of the West. Although the process implied the same kind of qualitative changes associated with gentrification in many major cities, it did not displace the local working population in Minzhu Village. Instead, it improved their lives, drawing them increasingly into the living standards of the urban middle class — out of poverty, and into what the CPC calls "moderate prosperity", a stage of development where basic needs are met and a comfortable standard of living becomes available to all. This was grounded in needs articulated before, during, and after the redevelopment process by members of the community. The farmers' market was modernized, the stream was cleaned up, the canteen was built, and new institutions and infrastructures for leisure, recreation, and community development were constructed around the Village.[1]

This process — of broad, popular consultation that transforms the lives of working people — is the cornerstone of the Chinese notion of "whole-process people's democracy". It reflects a revolutionary methodology that seeks to develop a "mass line" by continuously interpreting, systematizing, and realizing the ideas of the people. This can be a difficult process. Xiong Jie and Tings Chak have described in detail how it worked during the restoration of Erhai Lake, which involved a prolonged back-and-forth between party officials and local residents to overcome conflicts, reach compromises, and gain popular support for practical solutions.[2]

The approach fundamentally challenges the prevailing narratives in the West about the Chinese government's lack of democracy and popular legitimacy — suggesting, instead, that the Chinese democratic process is in many ways more responsive and more participatory than Western models of liberal democracy. Indeed, data collected in several studies on this question — many of them conducted by established Western liberal institutions — show not only that the government in China enjoys substantial popular support at all levels, but also that more people in China believe their political system is democratic, fair, and serves the interests of the people than almost anywhere else in the world.

This paper provides an overview of the Chinese democratic model. First, it considers the nature of socialist democracy as opposed to liberal democracy. Second, it looks at the characteristics of "whole-process people's democracy" in China and contrasts it with the democratic models that prevail in the West. Third, it looks at data on system support and public perceptions of democracy in China.

What is socialist democracy?

To many in the West, democracy requires the existence of multiple parties capable of containing within them different visions for the future of society and giving expression to different opinions. In this view, the state is a neutral arbiter and the principle of "one person, one vote" guarantees equality of democratic participation.

This is a nice ideal, but it obfuscates the role of class power. In such a system, it is very easy for the dominant class — the class with the most financial and organizational power — to determine political outcomes in its own interests, capture the state, and prevent any democratic challenges to its rule. Indeed this is precisely what occurs under capitalism. The result is that the state serves as an instrument of capitalist class rule. Its institutional arrangements and political customs serve to advance and secure the domination by one class over another. "Order" and "stability" moderate class conflict in the interests of preserving the power of capital and preventing the emergence of a political system that serves working people.[3] In effect, liberal democracy facilitates the consolidation and operation of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie.

> "Socialist democracy must... be seen as a historic, multi-generational and dialectical process by which conditions that enable increasing parts of society to play an active role in governance are created, nurtured, and defended."

Western states are routinely described as democracies. But in reality the exercise of democracy is severely curtailed. In the US, for instance, power is passed back and forth between two establishment parties, both of which are explicitly pro-capitalist and committed to the interests of the capitalist class. Third parties —

including socialist parties — are effectively frozen out of the national political process; they face serious obstacles when it comes to getting on ballots and securing airtime in official political debates. What is more, elites and corporations can spend unlimited money on campaign finance, to promote and install politicians who will shape policy to their benefit, in what can only be described as institutionalized political corruption. Democracy is meaningless under these conditions.

A 2014 study published by Cambridge University Press found that US policy implementation generally follows the preferences of elites and organized business lobbies, even when it runs against the preferences of the majority.[4] In other words, the US more closely resembles an oligarchy than a democracy. This reality is reflected in opinion surveys. Data from the Democracy Perception Index shows that only 54% of US Americans believe their country is actually democratic, and only 42% say the government serves the majority of people.[5] These are striking figures in the country that promotes itself as a bastion of "democracy".

Even in countries with more robust multi-party systems and limits on campaign finance, there are severe constraints placed on democratic processes. For instance, under conditions where the dominant media outlets are owned by capitalist firms, or indeed directly controlled by billionaires and oligarchs, it is virtually impossible for working-class political movements to get a fair hearing. As we saw in Britain during the 2017 election, the major media companies closed ranks and ran a coordinated disinformation campaign that demonized the socialist left and succeeded in locking them out of power.

More importantly, under capitalism democracy is relegated to periodic and highly ritualized participation in the political realm, but is entirely precluded in the economic realm, even though the latter affects our everyday lives and determines the shape and direction of our civilization. When capital controls production, the purpose of production and reinvestment is not to meet human needs, achieve social progress, or realise democratically ratified objectives; the purpose is to maximize and accumulate profits. Decisions about how to use our labour and the productive capacities of our society are made in the narrow interests of the capitalist class. The workers — the people actually doing the production — rarely get any voice at all. This arrangement is profoundly undemocratic. Indeed, it is reasonable to say that, regardless of whatever political arrangements a given society might have, if people do not have control over their own production and over investment of the surplus they generate, it cannot be described as a democracy. This arrangement explains the perverse outcomes we see in capitalist economies, where even in cases of high aggregate production, there are chronic shortages of basic things like affordable housing, nutritious food and public transit.

As far as capital is concerned, democracy is dangerous and must be prevented as much as possible. Indeed, the only concessions capitalism has historically made to the working classes have occurred in conditions of militant social struggle and tectonic global transformation. The expansion of democratic political parties in early 20th century Europe followed a period of prolonged labor militancy, which won concessions from the capitalist classes who were eager to stave off revolutionary momentum. Early socially-oriented policies in the West can also be traced to the perceived risk of communist revolution inspired by October 1917, and

by the integration of Western European communist parties into the Communist International.6

In the second half of the 20th century, a robust social democratic consensus emerged from the ashes of world war and reflected the systemic confrontation with the Soviet Union, which had secured tremendous prestige globally in defeating European fascism while making historic strides in industrialization and social development. This was a real victory for the Western working classes, although it is crucial to recall that capitalists were only willing to make these concessions because they knew they could maintain conditions for accumulation by relying on surplus appropriated from the periphery. Social democracy in the core has always relied on an imperial arrangement.

Today, the core economies struggle to achieve the rates of growth and accumulation that characterized previous decades, largely because of increasing movements for economic sovereignty in the periphery. As a result, Western governments are responding by dismantling the social democratic compact at home and escalating imperial violence abroad, revealing that capitalism's accommodations to working people were only ever granted insofar as they remained structurally compatible with continued capital accumulation.

Socialists have long understood these tendencies. They have understood that an open political system with privately owned media cannot, in the context of severe imbalances in class power, deliver real democracy. This is particularly true in the periphery, where imperialist powers are adept at intervening in elections and other political processes to crush liberation movements and prop up comprador elites.

Political parties — like the state — cannot be understood outside questions of class. Parties emerge, attract support, and function as representatives of a given class interest and reflect the dynamic balance of power among the classes. Absent a party created in their image, the working class is forced to align politically with an alien subjectivity: the subjectivity of the oppressing class. The existence of multiple, competing capitalist parties truncates the political horizon of working people by dividing them along secondary issues that conceal the fundamental class contradictions that structure their societies and their lives. This transforms non-antagonistic contradictions within the working class into antagonistic ones,7 for example by dividing working people on questions of immigration, rather than uniting them in the service of liberation.

Various possible socialist alternatives have been advanced. For instance, after the removal of the capitalist class from control over production and the state, a multi-party system could be established where all parties must subscribe to basic socialist principles. This is multi-party democratic socialism. However, this approach may still be vulnerable to imperialist intervention, which could leverage party conflict to destabilize a country or bring down a government. An alternative path, chosen by China, is government by a single Communist Party with a mass membership broadly representative of the people, which is constitutionally committed to advancing the interests of the working class, which has an organic grassroots presence in communities with strong practices of engagement and consultation, and which is organized according to internal democratic practices (democratic centralism).

Beyond political-procedural measures, the objective of socialist democracy is also to extend the principle of democracy into the realm of production. Decisions about what to invest in, what to produce, and who should benefit from the yields of production — all of these should be subject to the will of the people and aligned with the interests of the working classes.

The representation of the masses of people in the political and economic process opens the door to a much more expansive set of claims that can be made against the state. If Western democracy confines itself to formal political rights and freedoms — which in themselves are heavily constrained when they come to threaten the class domination of capitalists within the state — socialist democracy seeks also to realize those plus the masses' economic and social rights. This is because substantive liberation cannot be attained in conditions of economic deprivation. Can someone be said to be free if they are hungry, thirsty or homeless? Freedom is not simply a rhetorical commitment. It has to emerge alongside the realization of certain material and historical conditions. It requires stable development and a state capable of channeling that development to serve social needs. As Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote in The German Ideology:

> "in general, people cannot be liberated as long as they are unable to obtain food and drink, housing and clothing in adequate quality and quantity. 'Liberation' is an historical and not a mental act, and it is brought about by historical conditions."[8]

People experience oppression and deprivation in different ways that reflect the specifics of their local geographies, economies, histories, and cultures. There can be no one-size-fits all approach to advancing their political, economic and social rights. That is why socialism demands the deep participation of the masses of people in the process of development. Without active discussion, democracy can produce little more than silent acquiescence to policies and solutions of a highly general nature. This is a necessary objective of socialism, even though not all actually-existing socialisms have achieved it in equal measure.

Reflecting on the organization of Party cadres, Mao Zedong emphasized, "No one in a leading position is competent to give general guidance to all the units unless he derives concrete experience from particular individuals and events..."[9] In other words, there needs to exist an organic bond between the mechanisms of the Party and the concrete experiences of the people. In representing the interests of the vast majority, the Communist Party must create the conditions for mass participation in the governance of the state. Without this, the thread binding the people to the process of socialist construction is lost and the state's direction of movement is distorted by bureaucratic inertia or other narrow interests.

But it would be idealistic to demand that a revolutionary process conjure a system of universal participation immediately, as many Western Marxists insist. Social transformation can be a long and difficult road, and the weight of historical inheritance, expressed in disparities in education, resources, productive capacities, and institutional stability, requires a systematic approach. Attitudes and cultural norms that linger from the old world — patterns of exploitation and submission — cannot be overcome with a snap of the fingers. Some of the earliest elections in

China had peasants vote by putting a stone in the bowl of their preferred candidate; the peasants were illiterate.

Every socialist country has faced an extreme state of exception, with constant military encirclement, economic warfare through sanctions and blockade, and cultural-informational assaults waged by imperialism. In this context, revolutionary states may choose to prioritize national defence and industrial development as a safeguard against the subordination of its structures of social reproduction to the anarchic and destructive mode of imperialist accumulation. As an expression of popular sovereignty within the state, democracy cannot be construed without consideration for its material safeguards, or abstracted from the schemes by which imperialism seeks to thwart it.

Socialist democracy must, therefore, be seen as a historic, multi-generational and dialectical process by which conditions that enable increasing parts of society to play an active role in governance are created, nurtured, and defended. China has advanced on this path further than most societies in modern history. From early experiments in village-level organization to building a nationwide process for 1.4 billion people from 56 ethnic groups across a country spanning over nine million square kilometers, this process has come to be contained in a concept called "whole-process people's democracy" — a practice of democratic governance built on over a century of organizational experience.

Whole-Process People's Democracy

The concept of "whole-process people's democracy" was first articulated by President Xi Jinping in a September 2014 speech at a conference marking the 65th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC).[10] Xi emphasized the "consultative" element that had long been embedded in China's socialist democracy. "Putting people's democracy into practice and ensuring the people's position as masters of the country," he said, "demands that we initiate extensive discussions throughout the whole of society while governing the country."[11]

To understand the role of consultation in the Chinese revolutionary process, it is necessary to briefly revisit the history of the development of the CPC. From as early as the 1930s, the times of the Jiangxi Soviet Republic, the Party experimented with strategies to incorporate the masses — who for centuries had been downtrodden and never sufficiently organized to dislodge the structures of oppression that held them down — into active political life. This, it was widely understood, was the only way to build the revolution. It would have been impossible to overcome the "three mountains" of imperialism, feudalism, and capitalism without organizing the majority of society against their oppressors. From this premise emerged the concept of the "mass line" and a process of studying the views of the masses, coordinating and systematizing them, and then taking them back to the masses where they could be adopted as popular analysis and their correctness could be tested through collective action. The exercise repeats, again and again, in a continuous process of identifying and resolving the contradictions facing society. "In all the practical work of our Party," Mao Zedong said, "all correct leadership is necessarily 'from the masses, to the masses'."[12]

"The Chinese model demonstrates that democracy need not be confined to periodic electoral exercises or formal procedural rights divorced from material conditions."

In his ethnographic study of the revolutionary transformation of China's Long Bow Village between 1945 and 1948, William Hinton observed how this process was applied to radically upend the centuries-old structures and traditions of feudalism. It was through consultation that land was redistributed and women gained their rights. It was through consultation that property expropriated from feudal landlords was redistributed to families that often had just one pot and a single change of clothes. It was through consultation that the management of newly collectivised plots of land was organized. At each stage, the scientific process of collectively formulating challenges, developing solutions, and testing these solutions against material realities helped develop the masses' capacities for governance. "Thus the peasants, under the guidance of the Communist Party, had moved step by step from partial knowledge to general knowledge, from spontaneous action to directed action, from limited success to over-all success," Hinton wrote. "And through this process they had transformed themselves from passive victims of natural and social forces into active builders of a new world."[13]

The CPC's rise to power through mass revolutionary mobilization, explicitly oriented toward improving conditions for peasants and workers, established the foundational relationships between the masses and the state that continue to underpin the Chinese social contract. That process developed — with advances, setbacks, successes, and failures — in the decades that followed the revolution. Today, the CPC has grown to include more than 100 million members and over 75 million youth league members. In effect, every family has at least one person in the Party, ensuring not only that a wide diversity of social positions and political views are represented within the party, but also that the CPC has direct channels to understanding what every segment of Chinese society wants or needs. Internally, the CPC operates under the model of democratic centralism, which constitutes the fundamental organizational principle and leadership system of the Party. Under this model, vigorous debate is encouraged internally at all levels to pool the collective wisdom of Party members. Then, CPC members commit to upholding agreed-upon decisions, ensuring that the efforts of the Party converge behind common goals.

It is worth emphasizing here that the CPC cannot be seen in the same light as political parties in liberal democracies. It is not an instrument of political competition. It is, instead, both a vehicle for mass participation in governance and a guarantor of the political system as a whole. In fact, China is not a one-party state. It has nine official parties: the CPC and eight democratic parties. This system is a historical inheritance. At the start of the 20th century, China experimented with multi-party liberal democracy. The effects were all but democratic. Over 300 parties formed around the country and, between 1912 and 1928, that system produced 10 different heads of state, 45 cabinets, and 59 prime ministers — sixteen

years of political chaos. The period of one-party dictatorship under Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang also failed, producing economic crisis and military defeat. All along, new parties emerged to contest power. A new political system was needed and the mandate to build it fell on the CPC. The system that emerged focused on developing a cooperative rather than competitive relationship among the existing political parties, which would serve as channels for different segments of society to participate in governance — for example by conducting research or consulting on legislation.[14]

This historical trajectory reflects a source of democratic legitimacy derived not from abstract institutional arrangements but from demonstrable improvements in material conditions for the majority of China's population. Lin Shangli argues for advancing policies that have "wholehearted support from the people" and deliver "sustained, stable, and sound national development" — achievements that would be impossible without robust consultative processes capable of identifying and resolving the concrete problems faced by the population.[15] Xi Jinping — who has sought to increase grassroots democratic mechanisms — has emphasised this in his speeches and writings:

> "The process of holding extensive deliberations among the people is the process of promoting democracy and drawing on collective wisdom, the process of unifying people's thinking and building consensus, the process of scientific and democratic decision-making, and the process of ensuring the position of the people as masters of the country. It is only in this way that we can have solid foundations for our country's governance and for social governance; it is only in this way that we are able to draw together strength."[16]

Three principal contrasts can be drawn with liberal democratic models in the West. First, in the West, the concept of democracy remains trapped in the straightjacket of idealism. It is treated as complete, a political system that has reached its final destination, an assertion that enables the weaponisation of liberal democracy against those that seek to advance rights that it does not accommodate. There is little talk in the West of deepening, expanding, or improving liberal democracy. For its lack of a clear scientific basis, Chinese scholars have referred to the Western system as "superstitious" or "cult"-like.[17] "Whole-process people's democracy", by contrast, is understood within the framework of historical and dialectical materialism. It is an ever-expanding process, which necessarily deepens, broadens and improves as greater parts of the population are drawn into the system of governance, and whose impacts are measured by the material and immaterial improvements it makes to people's lives. "There is no end to the human exploration and practice of democracy," write Cheng Enfu and Chen Jian.[18]

As part of this process, China learns from its own mistakes and shortcomings. As in any country, there have been moments where insufficient feedback and accountability mechanisms in the policy-making process have had adverse consequences, sometimes serious, on the country and its people. But China's current system reflects a determination to absorb the lessons from history and — through continuous reflection and feedback — re-calibrate policy to overcome past limitations.

Second, Western liberal democracies ensure that few people are active in the political process outside the voting booth — a limited and periodic exercise whose outcomes are warped and corrupted by disparities in economic power. By contrast, China's democratic model aims to sustain the masses' broad participation in the political process at all times and at all levels — this is what is meant by "whole process". This is true at the voting booth. In 2016 and 2017, over 900 million voters took part in elections to people's congresses at the township and county levels — the first two levels of China's five-level system of elections representing 90% community participation. In more recent years, the number of voters has reached over one billion, exceeding the number of voters in India and making China's elections the largest democratic elections conducted anywhere in the world. But mass participation must also be true beyond the voting booth, a point that Xi Jinping highlighted in a speech in October 2021:

> "If the people are awakened only at voting time and dormant afterward; if the people hear big slogans during elections but have no say after; if the people are favoured during canvassing but are left out after elections, this is not true democracy."

The promise of political equality contained in the concept of "one person, one vote" does not, on its own, extend to the more expansive social and economic rights contained within socialist conceptions of development and democracy. Apart from elections, then, "whole-process people's democracy" ensures mass participation through consultations, seminars, meetings, debates, symposia, hearings, councils, criticisms, and other forms of popular feedback that help shape legislative and policy outcomes. In this way, when China was developing its Civil Code, it held 10 rounds of public consultations, receiving over one million comments from 425,000 people.[19] In the ongoing consultations for China's 15th Five-Year Plan, set to be implemented from 2026 to 2030, the Chinese government received over three million suggestions from the public — or three times more than it did over a similar period for the 14th Five-Year Plan in 2020.[20]

These figures alone do not capture the breadth and depth of the process, which involves a complex tapestry of channels for popular consultation and feedback. Like the mailbox in Minzhu Village, the state operates so-called "12345 service hotlines" across the country. These hotlines, which guarantee an "immediate response upon receipt of complaint", aim at addressing public concerns and form part of a broader toolkit of communications channels that include call centers, mayoral mailboxes, mobile apps, and groups on WeChat, China's "everything app". In this way, governments at all levels respond to public demands and address the issues and problems that directly concern the public. At the legislative level, the development of policies tends to follow extensive, multi-year processes where political parties, research institutions, mass movements and other organizations across the country are enlisted to carry out research and host debates and conferences on concrete policy questions, which then feed back into the process of policy formation. Ahead of the 20th National Congress of the CPC, for example, 54 research institutions took part in carrying out studies that fed into the official report, producing 80 papers. In that process, 64 research teams carried out 179 field visits to provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities; 25 research teams

conducted written surveys of 465 organizations; and 10 research teams commissioned 252 organizations to conduct specialized studies. The research teams engaged 19,022 participants, and conducted consultations and interviews with 1,847 individuals. Online public opinion consultations for the 20th Congress Report received over eight million responses.[21]

Third, liberal democracy is exercised primarily by and in the interests of the capitalist ruling class. As a result, great pains are taken to constrain societies' politicization outside the narrow parameters that preserve the dominion of capital over labour — and there are few mechanisms to hold power to account beyond elections. Where political activation occurs outside of electoral periods, it necessarily emerges in opposition to government and state policies, and is often expressed as a reaction to broken electoral promises. This is because the control of the state by capitalists necessarily produces antagonistic class relations, with the capitalist class seeking to maximise its benefit through oppression, while the working class seeks to abolish that oppression. By contrast, in a revolutionary society, the masses have seized state power and therefore constitute the state and represent the primary source of its legitimacy and power. As Mao Zedong observed, this produces contradictions of a fundamentally different nature than those that exist within capitalism:

> "In capitalist society contradictions find expression in acute antagonisms and conflicts, in sharp class struggle; they cannot be resolved by the capitalist system itself and can only be resolved by socialist revolution. The case is quite different with contradictions in socialist society; on the contrary, they are not antagonistic and can be ceaselessly resolved by the socialist system itself..."[22]

The imperative is therefore to generate structures of governance and cultures of political accountability that work alongside the state system to advance common goals. This is what is meant by "people's democracy", a concept that emerged in contrast to "bourgeois democracy". It is a system in which policies strive to "truly reflect the people's concerns, embody their aspirations, promote their wellbeing, and meet their desire for a better life."[23] Victor Gao — a Chinese lawyer and academic who is a member of the Revolutionary Committee of the Chinese Kuomintang, one of the eight democratic parties in China — compared the Chinese and Western democratic models to a car. In the Chinese system, he said, the car's wheels all move in one direction. In other systems, the wheels of the same car move in conflicting directions, "resulting not in synergy or coordination and greater results, but inefficiency, incompetence, a lack of achievements, and no fundamental benefits for the people."[24] The need to move in a shared direction has consequences for the accountability of officials: voters can not only elect officials into office, but also remove them from power if they do not adequately reflect the interests of the people.[25] The public is also encouraged to report officials for corruption or misconduct and such reports have real consequences. Between 2012 and 2022, 4.7 million people faced various forms of punishment for corruption alone.[26]

The Chinese model of "whole-process people's democracy" thus integrates two major democratic models: electoral democracy and consultative democracy. It begins at the township level (乡镇级), where Township People's Congresses are directly elected by communities. At this level, participation is also guaranteed by

self-governing village committees with direct elections and local consultation meetings and forums. Elections at the grassroots level represent the most extensive and dynamic form of democracy in China, which includes the election of village committees, urban residents committees, and employee congresses in enterprises and public institutions. This is significant because China remains heavily decentralized. Local governments — including the provincial, prefectural, county, township, and village levels — make up 50 percent of government revenue and account for nearly 85 percent of expenditures. China's central government is responsible for only 15 percent of total government expenditure — the global average is 66 percent.[27]

At the county level (县级), there are County People's Congresses supported by county CPPCC committees; specialized committees on agriculture, industry, education, and other areas; and public hearings on major issues. At the prefecture/city level (地市级), there are Municipal People's Congresses and their standing committees, municipal CPPCC committees, sector-specific consultation mechanisms, and broad public participation in urban planning and development. At the provincial level (省级), there are Provincial People's Congresses and their standing committees, provincial CPPCC committees, inter-regional coordination mechanisms, and policy consultation processes with academic institutions and think tanks. Once the people elect deputies at the township and county levels, those deputies in turn elect deputies at higher levels of government (see Figure 1).

How China Elects Deputies

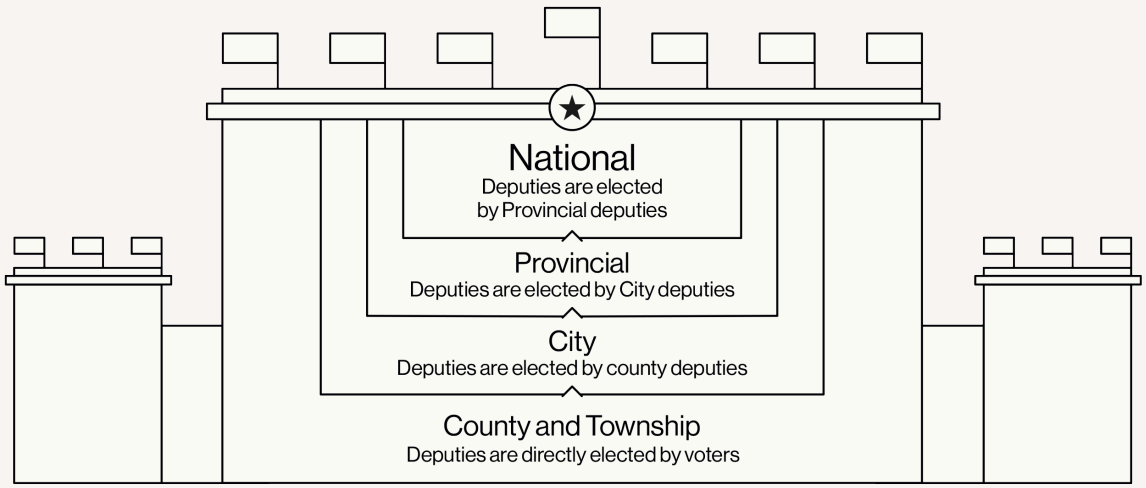

Figure 1: China's five-level electoral system.

China's community-level self-governance operates through five interconnected dimensions of democracy that create a comprehensive system of local participation and control. Democratic election forms the foundation through grassroots elections for villagers' committees, urban residents' committees, and employee congresses in enterprises and public institutions, with committee leaders and members elected simultaneously with township and county-level positions. Democratic consultation encompasses diverse channels including

proposals, conferences, discussions, seminars, hearings, assessments, internet platforms, and opinion polls, allowing communities to address matters affecting people's vital interests, particularly those concerning specific groups' rights. Democratic decision-making occurs through various meeting formats among villagers, urban residents, and their representatives, covering economic and social issues, infrastructure, social management, cultural services, environmental conservation, self-governance regulations, and other key local matters, with residents participating in both decision-making and implementation. Democratic management empowers urban and rural communities to establish their own rules and conventions governing residents' rights and obligations, organizational procedures, collective economy principles, neighborhood security, public safety, sanitation, marriage customs, family planning, and cultural activities, with communities managing their own public affairs and services under constitutional and legal frameworks. Finally, democratic oversight enables citizens, legal entities, and organizations to supervise state organs and staff performance through administrative review requests, litigation, and complaints to supervisory bodies regarding misconduct, dereliction of duty, abuse of power, or professional ethics violations, creating accountability mechanisms that complete the cycle of grassroots democratic governance.[28] Each of these levels was reflected in the comprehensive process of consultation that transformed Minzhu Village in Chongqing.

At the national level, these processes converge in the National People's Congress (NPC) and the National Committee of the CPPCC, alongside State Council consultation mechanisms and central government policy consultation processes. The NPC serves as China's highest organ of state power, with delegates elected through a multi-tiered indirect election system beginning with the direct election of officials at the township level. In 2023, the NPC had 2,977 members, including representatives of all 56 ethnic groups, with minorities accounting for 14.85% of the total (in this sense, minorities — which comprise about 10% of China's population — have higher-than-average representation in government). 16.69% of NPC members represented frontline workers and peasants, including 56 representatives of migrant workers. Party and government cadres represented 32.55% of the total, a figure that has slowly declined as more workers, peasants, and experts join the Congress.[29] The NPC meets annually and has a Standing Committee that exercises power between sessions. The CPPCC operates parallel to the NPC system from national to local levels. It includes representatives from China's eight democratic parties, ethnic minorities, religious groups, representatives from Hong Kong, Macau, the Taiwan region and Chinese people living abroad, and prominent individuals from various sectors. It serves as a consultative body for political dialogue and consensus-building.

Each of these levels of institutional decision-making reflects the evolution of the "mass line" process, where ideas, policies and reports are filtered upwards from communities to the national level and then applied downwards in the process of policy implementation — in the process refining and sharpening the tools that have made unprecedented improvements in peoples' lives.

Perceptions of Democracy in China

The overview of the Chinese system of "whole-process people's democracy" challenges the prevailing discourse within the Western academy, which construes China's political system through frameworks of authoritarian illegitimacy and positions the Chinese state as fundamentally dependent upon coercive mechanisms for its existence. Instead, the Chinese democratic process contains within it a rich tapestry of institutions and practices that, taken together, enable increasingly broad popular participation in the governance of the country.

Equally important is the question of how the Chinese people themselves view their democratic model. Here, comprehensive survey data on Chinese perceptions of democracy, including from established Western liberal institutions, reveal not only that the Chinese people are overwhelmingly satisfied with the work of their central and provincial governments, but also that the vast majority of Chinese people view their government as democratic and working in the service of the people.

Here we report data from several major studies. First, the Harvard University Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation has maintained what constitutes the most extensive independent assessment of Chinese citizen satisfaction with governmental performance, tracking popular attitudes since 2003. Their 2020 report, "Understanding CCP [sic] Resilience: Surveying Chinese Public Opinion Through Time," revealed broad popular support for the Chinese government at all levels. The study's authors, operating within an analytical framework that initially presumed China's authoritarian character would generate legitimacy crises, instead documented consistent increases in citizen satisfaction. Central government approval reached 93% by 2016, with provincial governments maintaining 82% support rates — with consistent increases over time (see Figure 2). Significantly, the research identified that marginalized populations in economically disadvantaged inland regions demonstrated comparatively higher increases in satisfaction, suggesting, in line with Chinese thinking on the function of "whole-process people's democracy", that state responsiveness to material conditions constitutes a key mechanism of its legitimacy.[30]

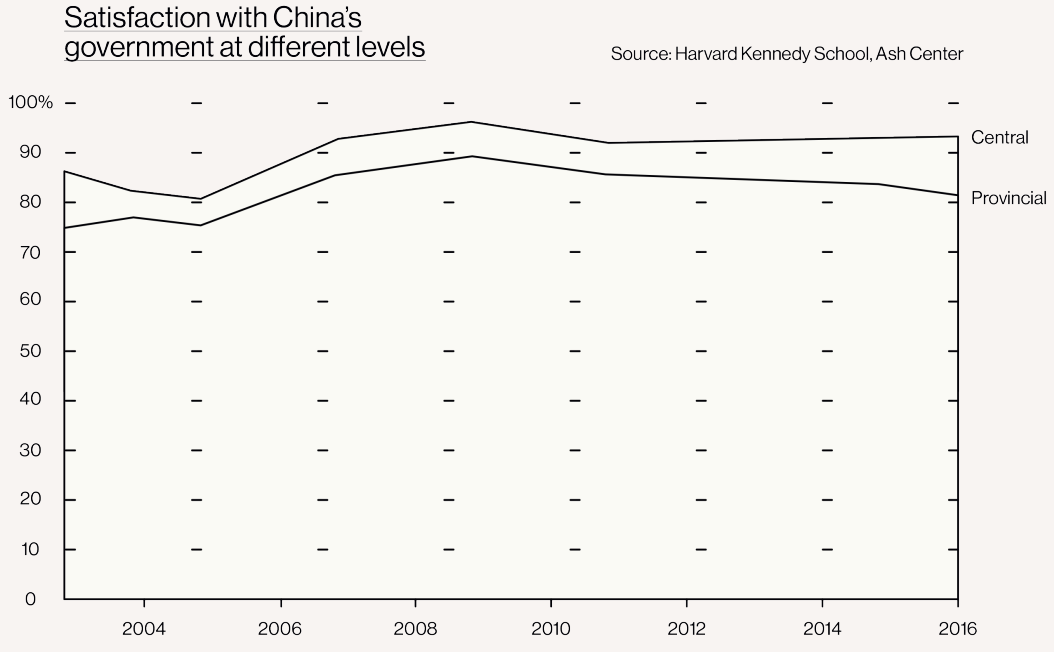

Figure 2: Harvard University Ash Center study on satisfaction with the government in China.

The authors summarize their results as follows. “We find that, since the start of the survey in 2003, Chinese citizen satisfaction with government has increased virtually across the board. From the impact of broad national policies to the conduct of local town officials, Chinese citizens rate the government as more capable and effective than ever before. Interestingly, more marginalized groups in poorer, inland regions are actually comparatively more likely to report increases in satisfaction. Second, the attitudes of Chinese citizens appear to respond (both positively and negatively) to real changes in their material well-being.”[31]

These results are consistent with data from the Asian Barometer Survey, which in 2015 found that 87% of respondents in China had a “great deal” or “quite a lot” of trust in the national government. So too with the World Values Survey, which consistently shows that over 90% of people in China report “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of trust in the national government. In 2018, the most recent wave, trust was at 95%, one of the highest levels in the world.

Complementing these findings, the Alliance of Democracies (AoD), established by former NATO leadership and Danish governmental officials, has produced annual reports of the Democracy Perception Index since 2019. Through partnership with German market research firm Latana, the AoD employs methodological approaches specifically designed to mitigate response bias and self-censorship concerns. The 2024 findings reveal that 92% of Chinese respondents consider democracy important, 79% characterize their country as democratic, and 91% perceive their government as serving broad popular interests rather than elite constituencies — each of these figures was higher than in almost any other country in the world, and far ahead on each of these metrics than respondents in the US, France and Britain, the classic liberal democracies (see Figure 3).[32]

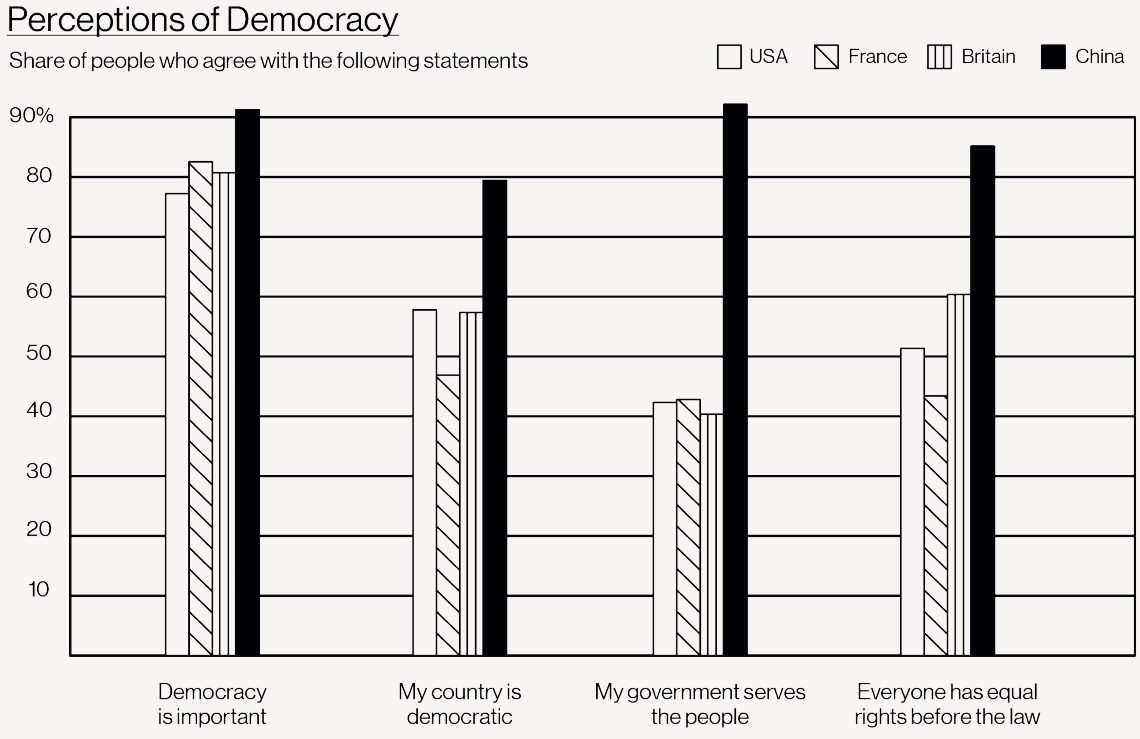

Figure 3: Democracy perceptions index 2024 for the US, France, Britain and China.

The AoD study also assesses people's perceptions of freedom of expression, and free and fair elections. Here too, China outperforms the US and most of Europe. When given the statement "Everyone in my country can freely express their opinion on political and social topics", only 18% of people in China disagreed (compared to 27% in the US). And when given the statement "Political leaders in my country are elected in free and fair elections", only 5% in China disagreed (compared to 27% in the US).

Finally, a recent study published in the journal Political Psychology asked people in 42 countries whether they think their system is fair and just.[33] They used the following questions: "In general, I find society to be fair", "In general my country's political system operates as it should", "Everyone in my country has a fair shot at wealth and happiness", and "My country's society is set up so that people usually get what they deserve". The results show that in most countries the average response is either "somewhat disagree" or "neutral". There is only one country where the average response is in the range of "somewhat agree", and that is China. In other words, people in China are more likely to agree their system is fair and just than any other country in the set.

These are all remarkable results. Some skeptics have questioned the data, saying that respondents may overstate support for their government if they live in a system where they are likely to fear repression for expressing political dissent. This is known as "strategic misreporting". But the fact that all of these studies find low scores in countries known for political repression suggests this is not a real problem. In any case, this question has been explored at length in the scholarly literature on China. Researchers have carried out several studies using methods specifically designed to exclude strategic misreporting — such as list experiments and implicit association tests. Over and over again, these studies confirm that people in China do indeed have high levels of support for their government and their political-economic system.[34]

These empirical findings mount a fundamental challenge to liberal analytical frameworks deployed to assess political legitimacy. The consistently high approval ratings documented across multiple independent studies suggest that legitimacy may derive less from procedural democratic forms than from substantive governmental responsiveness to popular material conditions. This observation aligns with historical materialist analyses that prioritize the relationship between state power, the popular masses, and economic development over purely procedural democratic mechanisms.

Consider the fact that, over the past two decades, wages in the manufacturing sector in China have increased eight-fold. Wages in China have gone from being one of the lowest in Asia to now higher than in every other developing country in the region. China now has one of the highest life expectancies in the developing world. In fact, healthy life expectancy in China is now more than four years longer than in the US, according to GBDS data.[35] These are major historical developments and their significance is not lost on the Chinese people.

We noted above that the objective of socialist democracy includes extending the principle of democracy into the realm of production. Our focus in this piece is on political processes and it is beyond our scope to explore whether and to what

extent economic democracy has been achieved in China. This is a subject of considerable debate among socialists, including within China itself. On the one hand, public control over the financial sector and the commanding heights (state-owned firms account for nearly one-third of China's GDP) allows China to direct investment and production in line with democratically-ratified national development plans. On the other hand, left critics point out that many Chinese workers' direct experience of the labour process remains one of exploitation within capitalist firms.

In recent years, it appears that the CPC is pushing for more worker democracy within firms. For instance, recent directives require that firms with more than three employees who are CPC members must grant these workers representation in company governance. The coming decades will reveal more about the direction that the CPC takes on the issue of economic democracy, but from our conversations with people in China it seems clear that since 2012, and particularly since the 19th National Congress in 2017, the government has accelerated the push towards socialism; it is now China's official goal to build a "modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, civilized, and harmonious" by 2049. These are not mere slogans, but reflections of a broad range of concrete policy areas with clear success criteria. The targeted poverty-alleviation program, for example, had as one of its major pillars the development of cooperative economies across the Chinese countryside.

In sum, the Chinese case demonstrates how alternative democratic formations — characterized in China as "whole-process people's democracy" — can generate legitimacy through different pathways than those valorized within liberal democracies. The principle of democratic centralism, combined with institutionalized popular participation in policy formulation processes, creates mechanisms for governmental responsiveness that transcend the periodic electoral cycles that constitute a ceiling on political engagement in capitalist societies.

Conclusion

The transformation of Minzhu Village — one of thousands of cases across China — provides a concrete illustration of how "whole-process people's democracy" operates as a reality for China's 1.4 billion people. The hundreds of courtyard meetings, the digitized mailbox collecting resident suggestions, and the comprehensive consultation process that guided the village's regeneration are a microcosm of broader mechanisms through which Chinese socialist democracy translates popular participation into material improvements in people's lives. This process, rooted in over a century of revolutionary experience and methodology, challenges fundamental assumptions about the relationship between democracy, development, and political legitimacy that have long dominated Western discourse — and reveals the superiority of socialist democracy, with its focus not only on political rights, but also on social and economic rights.

The Chinese model demonstrates that democracy need not be confined to periodic electoral exercises or formal procedural rights divorced from material

conditions. ″Whole-process people′s democracy″ integrates electoral and consultative mechanisms across multiple levels of governance, from village committees to the NPC, creating continuous channels for popular participation in decision-making processes. More importantly, it grounds democratic legitimacy in demonstrable improvements to people′s material and social conditions — the elimination of absolute poverty, massive infrastructure development, technological advancement, and rising living standards achieved through processes that systematically incorporated popular input and oversight into policymaking.

This understanding of democracy as an expanding historical process rather than a fixed institutional arrangement reflects the broader methodological differences between historical materialist and liberal approaches to political analysis. Where liberal democracy treats existing Western institutional forms as the endpoint of democratic development, socialist democracy views democratic practice as continuously evolving in response to changing material conditions and popular needs. As Lin Shangli argues, there is a close interrelationship between democracy and development: "Democracy is both a precondition for modernization and one of its essential missions; it serves as both an instrument for progress as well as an objective in the modernization drive."[36] The Chinese experience suggests that this dialectical approach — one that prioritizes substance over form and results over procedures — may offer more robust foundations for genuine popular sovereignty than systems that formalize political equality while tolerating vast economic disparities that undermine meaningful democratic participation.

More fundamentally, the Chinese experience demonstrates the inseparability of socialist construction and democracy. As Victor Gao observes:

> ″If anyone believed that China could have achieved the complete and profound economic transformation over the past four decades, completely eliminating abject poverty, and created the largest number of internet and smartphone users in the world, with more than 150 million people in China travelling throughout the world every year, without democracy, without the Chinese people actively participating in the decision-making process, something must be wrong with your analysis and conclusions.″[37]

The implications extend beyond China′s borders. In an era when Western liberal democracies face mounting crises of legitimacy — declining voter participation, growing inequality, institutional dysfunction, rising popular alienation from political processes, and the discarding of liberal democratic norms by states increasingly embroiled in wars of imperial expansion — the Chinese model offers alternative ways of conceptualizing the relationship between popular sovereignty and effective governance. It suggests that democracy′s ultimate test lies not in conformity to particular institutional arrangements developed in specific historical contexts, but in its capacity to activate the people in shaping the conditions of their lives and societies. Understanding ″whole-process people′s democracy″ therefore requires moving beyond the constraints imposed by liberal ideology to engage seriously with socialist approaches to political organization, which offer critical insights for all societies grappling with questions of development and popular sovereignty in the twenty-first century.

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