

Political Participation

Zhèngzhì cānyù 政治参与

Throughout China's long history people have enjoyed little in the way of political participation. Although formal involvement has increased somewhat since China's opening and the beginning of reform in 1979, the Chinese continue to use alternative measures—ranging from tax evasion to underground trade unions—to make their voices heard. The rise of the Internet in China has been especially useful in encouraging public debate.

China's traditional political culture allowed the majority of the population only a small role in local and national politics. Confucianism established an individual's duties to the ruler, the state, and the family, but not an individual's rights. Independent political groups and parallel power structures were always suppressed. One exception was with the concept of the "Mandate of Heaven," which gave the emperor his divine right to rule. The people were permitted to depose an incompetent ruler if the state were in political, economic, and social decline.

At times throughout history, Chinese villages and communities enjoyed a relatively large degree of autonomy. Clans, kinship groups, secret societies, temple organizations, and guilds organized around common political and social goals. Also, opposition to the state occurred informally through connections, corruption,

negotiation, and strategy. But overall, political participation has nearly always been reserved for a chosen elite.

Politics Emerge

A legal system with laws and courts developed during the Republican China era (1912–1949). During this time political parties, professional associations, literary and artistic circles, and mass media emerged. In the early 1930s, attempts were made to conduct general elections for the offices of heads of villages or communities. But the consolidation of state power between 1912 and 1949 limited the development of a civil society and universal political participation.

COMMUNIST CONTROL

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) initially allowed various degrees of political participation in areas under its control. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China (1949), however, the party controlled virtually all political and public life. Occasional reforms to allow general participation were short-lived; for example, Mao Zedong's Hundred Flowers campaign, a brief period of open criticism of the government, lasted only several weeks in 1957. As dissatisfaction with the party spread, critics were arrested, branded as Rightists, and punished. From then on such movements were subject to stronger political and ideological control.

Mao's "mass line"—the political, strategic, and

organizational framework of the CCP—included a model of leadership wherein leaders were to learn from the people. In theory it involved open meetings between the peasants and workers and party officials, with the aim of adapting party policies to the current situation. In practice, however, party officials listened to the people's complaints and opinions and then interpreted them according to the party's goals. It sought the people's support, not their participation.

The CCP launched various campaigns to mobilize the masses to help the party reach its economic or political aims. Diverse opinions or new forms of organizations were tolerated only if they supported the goals of the party political elite. Mass mobilization was closely supervised by the political elite. The methods for participation endorsed by the party—criticism of officials, self-criticism, posted newsheets, ideological study groups—became ritualized and more a means of social control than of promoting political participation.

ERA OF REFORM

Various reforms since 1979 have opened up people's possibilities for increased social and political involvement. New groups have joined existing groups that were not represented in the party—private entrepreneurs, professional associations, migrant workers, ethnic minorities, and religious organizations—and together they have sought economic, social, and political participation and the creation of channels to express and pursue their interests. This is true for both formal and informal structures.

Formal participation takes place both within and outside the party in mass organizations (unions, the Communist Youth League, Women's Federation, People's Militia); in the so-called Political Consultative Conferences (political advisory boards consisting of delegates from a wide range of political parties, organizations and individuals); and in many new associations, clubs, and nongovernmental organizations. The needs and actions of these diverse groups influence political decision making at the national level. The increasing separation between the public and private sectors and the state's decreasing influence on many aspects of society have allowed these groups to strengthen their autonomy and create a social counterweight to state actions.

This leads to more direct political participation, as evidenced in new laws enacted in the early 1980s governing general elections at the county, township, and village levels. Although these elections have generally been limited in certain ways, they may generate a type of grassroots democracy, particularly at the village level. By the end of the 1990s, elections were being conducted in urban neighborhood communities (*shequ*) as well.

Informal Political Participation

Although the party exerts a powerful influence on formal political participation, a study of informal patterns shows that participation and decision making exist at all levels of society. Where there are few opportunities for formal participation, informal, or unofficial, participation by groups or individuals helps to advance particular interests.

On an informal level, the practice of *guanxi*, which literally means “social relationships,” is used to influence decisions or push interests. *Guanxi* functions through business relationships, friendships, patronage, nepotism, and bribery. It is a permissible and common way to make a deal, reach a compromise, and negotiate, as long as the practice does not disrupt the political framework of the CCP.

Informal political participation also includes illegal acts, such as organizing unauthorized demonstrations or strikes (this has especially become prevalent since the rise of the Internet and cellular phones), refusing to pay taxes, and forming illicit interest groups like underground trade unions, secret societies, underground churches, and hometown associations. Again, all of these activities have mushroomed with increased Internet usage.

Also on an informal level, a kind of regionalism has developed based on local resources and interests. In areas with strong local markets, local economic interests take priority over state interests. Communities underreport profits in order to pay fewer taxes and use the money for local development. They ban products to or from other provinces (a practice known as protectionism) to bolster their own markets. This localism also includes communities' negotiating how much income tax to pass on to the central government or how to implement national policies, sometimes even ignoring certain state policies.

To better implement its policies and garner support, the CCP has been trying to include more people and groups in discussions and consultations. Special interest groups, which have been gaining political leverage at the unofficial level, have helped stimulate this attempt to widen political participation. The discourse, however, is limited because all parties involved must accept the policies and leadership of the CCP. Nevertheless, groups that in the past had no means of expressing their needs, desires, and interests now have the opportunity to do so.

Collective Action by Social Groups

For many years China's peasants have practiced highly effective forms of protest. Protests originally deployed the "weapons of the weak," a term used by the sociologist James Scott to describe forms of resistance by some of the downtrodden members of a society. These weapons included such actions as supplying falsified harvest figures; underreporting the amount of arable land and income; yielding the lowest quality products to the state; ignoring state directives; evading taxes; neglecting, stealing, or destroying state property; and organizing unofficial special interest groups. This kind of everyday resistance is a type of political participation by the disenfranchised. It can, in the long term, lead to political change because of its high social and economic costs.

An example of collective action leading to political change took place in the late 1970s. Because of decline and poverty, peasants in certain areas decided to divide collectively held land among themselves and return to family-run farming. The economic success of this unofficial form of participation led to the CCP's approving it as "agricultural reform" and subsequently implementing new policy across the country. Collective action, or unofficial participation, provided a solution for economic difficulties and was, therefore, approved by the party.

The social scientist Yu Jianrong suggested that political participation of peasants changed from spontaneous "routine resistance" before the 1990s, to "lawful rebellion" (citing state policies or laws to oppose political arbitrariness at the local level) until 1998, and to "actively using the law to fight" since then. According to Yu, using the law to fight is characterized by a struggle for political rights

and the enforcement of existing laws and regulations. It is directed toward local officials, not the political system. Peasants establish transvillage communication networks, demonstrate, and conduct sit-ins to enact change. Their actions are "permitted by law" but "prohibited by politics." In the future this might change from securing rights by law to political participation by law. The peasantry could become a strong force for general participation.

Although direct participation in Chinese power structures still depends on membership in the CCP, political power and political influence do not stem only from party membership. More than ever before, China's people have the opportunity to express their interests, to act, and to participate in the political life of the nation.

Rise of the Internet

The Internet is another field of participation that in recent years has spawned new forms of public activity. It has had an effect on the emergence of a new form of public space, the development of "virtual" social organizations, and of widespread protest activities that would have been virtually unthinkable before. Furthermore, by encouraging public debate and the articulation of problems it functions as a tool for social transparency.

In 2008 the number of Internet users in China reached more than 250 million. Yet this figure does not say much about how the Internet is used. A Chinese study found that 46.2 percent of those surveyed used the Internet for information, while nearly a third (32.2 percent) used it mainly for entertainment. Certainly Internet access provides an alternative source of information on domestic and international developments, yet it remains to be seen whether or not the Internet will function as a tool for political change.

Undoubtedly in recent years the number of Internet portals with news and up-to-date information, as well as the number of virtual communities, has significantly increased. In particular, the better-educated and younger people in urban areas participate more in public debates in the public space of the Internet, thus redefining the interrelationship between the state and society. The anonymity of the Internet has spawned a newly critical public. Active users who pick up information on social injustice, on the hush-up of local disasters, criminal activities, and

corruption, and spread the news and put it up for public discussion are called *wang luo gong min*—“netizens” (a portmanteau of Internet and citizen).

A prominent example was the case of a worker who, after a flagrant misjudgment, was executed in Shaanxi province in 2002. This provoked a public debate on the death penalty and legal procedures in China. Not only jurists and Communist Party–sponsored newspapers but also thousands of citizens via the Internet participated in the debate. The discussions were rather heated and many participants expressed fury and outrage. Although the party leadership finally put an end to the discussion, it did request that the legal authorities decrease the number of people scheduled to be sentenced to death. The Supreme People’s Court was ordered to reexamine each death sentence. The death penalty, however, is not yet abolished; in fact, China leads the world in numbers of

annual executions (although it is the fourteenth in terms of per capita executions). But this case reveals that people increasingly use the Internet to disseminate information and to vent grievances. Moreover, the Internet contributes to making public opinion and trends more transparent.

Another noticeable case that gained Internet attention was that of Sun Zhigang, a rural college graduate who was seized by the police in Guangzhou because he did not have a temporary residence card in his possession and could not prove his identity. He was detained and put into custody. Three days later, when his friends tried to locate him, they were told that he died of a heart attack; when his parents asked for an explanation the police provided no details. With financial help from Sun’s classmates the family was able to have an autopsy performed, and it was determined that Sun had been beaten

Passersby view a list of candidates for a municipal election in the northwest district of Beijing. China’s traditional political culture allowed the majority of the population only a small role in local and national politics. PHOTO BY JOAN LEBOLD COHEN.



to death. A journalism student from Beijing posted this news on a cyber-forum, and immediately after that online discussions arose, growing more and more intense, on the general behavior of the police, the amount of freedom given to the press, and the necessity of reforming the legal system. Jurists demanded a revision of the laws regarding the treatment of rural working migrants in China's cities and wrote to the national parliament (the National People's Congress) to either negate or revise the existing regulations. They also demanded that the congress investigate the incident and punish the those responsible. An open trial resulted in thirteen arrests and convictions of policemen, prison guards, and detainees. Eventually twenty-three additional policeman and government officials were disciplined for their involvement in or lack of response to Sun's death.

Such Internet movements are a form of collective action new to China: a more or less spontaneous concurrence of individual or group action that represents common interests and has an impact upon policies. These "e-social movements" include online petitioning, either against such things as software regulation and the censorship of Internet publications, or in support of such causes as the Tiananmen Mothers—an initiative of mothers whose children were killed during the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident—and the Living Buddha Zhaxi, who was detained due to alleged terrorist activities. Furthermore, since the mid-1990s autonomous virtual NGOs (non-governmental organizations) have increasingly used the Internet to organize online congresses and alternative groups. Numerous websites and virtual NGOs have arisen over the issue of environment protection, exposing environmental problems and disasters and thus inducing public debate.

Of course the party-state attempts to monitor Internet activities. It blocks discussions it considers to be too sensitive or too critical. As a further deterrent, from time to time people are arrested and sentenced to long imprisonments. Yet those measures essentially do nothing to dull the spirit of the Internet users or their debates.

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Further Reading

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