

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

How democratic are Chinese grassroots deliberations? An empirical study of 393 deliberation experiments in China

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Abstract

Chinese public hearings or consultations have been subject to numerous debates, doubts, and scepticism about the existence of Chinese deliberative democracy. More empirical evidence, however, is required about these debates before we can offer any meaningful account of the nature, characteristics, and direction of Chinese deliberation. In addition, although there have been many case studies on grassroots deliberative democracy, such studies are intellectually isolated from each other in the sense that they do not comprise a statistical unit. To overcome this deficiency, we developed a new research method for studying grassroots deliberation by collecting and validating the existing case studies, thereby making them a statistical unit. This paper aims to offer a big-picture perspective and the national statistical trend behind the uneven development of grassroots deliberative democracy. It develops an intellectual framework to assess whether grassroots deliberation is democratic. By collecting, validating, and coding 393 cases of Chinese grassroots deliberations, we have assessed Chinese grassroots deliberation, confirmed the cases' democratic attributes, and provided a solid statistical result. Although there is strong evidence to support the claim that these grassroots deliberation experiments are democratic, there remain some variations, nuances, and shortcomings. The full picture is not simple, but instead provides a mixed perspective.

Key words: Authoritarian deliberation; grassroots deliberation; deliberation experiments; empirical study; local deliberative democracy

Grassroots public consultation (deliberations, hearings, or forums) has played an increasingly important role in local governance. According to the State Council Information Office of the PRC, approximately 1.7 million village cadres nationwide created annual work summaries, more than 230,000 village cadres have involved in economic responsibility audits, and more than 2 million villagers reviewed village cadres in 2012. The deliberative practice at the city community level is also booming; various hearings among residents have been routinized and normalized. The 'Democratic Talkfest' has expanded nationwide, beginning in Wenling. According to the NTUs 2013 questionnaire survey of 34 Chinese cities, urban residents submitted good reviews of the government's solicitation and acceptance of public opinions, with scores of 6.12 points and 6.04 points, respectively (He and Wu 2016). Moreover, 'authoritarian deliberation' is utilized to describe the main features of Chinese grassroots deliberation, which provides residents in villages and communities with the opportunity to deliberate public affairs in public forums (Linz, 2000; He and Thøgersen, 2010; He and Warren, 2011; Teets, 2013).

Such grassroots deliberation has also attracted great attention from both domestic and international theoretical circles. According to results retrieved from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), 10,050 articles have 'deliberative democracy' in their titles. However, there is substantial controversy and debate about the differences between Chinese and Western deliberative democracy, the relationship between deliberative democracy and electoral democracy, and the democratic nature of

deliberative democracy. This paper attempts to examine the most significant debates on grassroots deliberation and offers empirical evidence for theoretical considerations about relevant problems.

The different opinions and judgments regarding Chinese grassroots deliberation involve both research methods and empirical evidence. Current studies on local deliberative democracy are limited to either a single case or a few cases at the local level as the result of a lack of quantitative study. The judgment of whether China has developed a local deliberative democracy is based largely on personal experience. Those who have witnessed only some practices of deliberative democracy are likely to be optimistic about the development of deliberative democracy in China, whereas those who have seen manipulative, symbolic, and cosmetic public consultations tend to deny the existence and development of local deliberative democracy in China. Even those involved in some deliberative experiments continue to express serious concerns about the nature of democracy, indicating that many other local governments still have not convened public deliberations. In addition, the best practices of deliberative democracy through the adoption of deliberative polling techniques in the case of Zeguo might be isolated and unrepresentative, thereby misleading the scholarly debate on the democratic nature of this experiment (Weber and Froehlich, 2016) despite the fact that this case meets all the criteria of deliberative democracy (Fishkin *et al.*, 2010). We need a quantitative picture of the widespread nature of local deliberative democracy. This paper aims to offer a broad perspective and describe the national landscape through an innovative method of compiling case studies.

Although there have been many case studies on grassroots deliberative democracy, such studies are intellectually isolated from each other in the sense that they do not form a statistical unit. To overcome this deficiency, this study aims to develop an intellectual framework whereby we can assess the status of democratic grassroots deliberation by collecting reliable cases and using a coding method to quantify unstructured case data so that we can develop a general overview of the basic situation of Chinese grassroots deliberative democracy. Accordingly, this paper collects 466 cases and identifies 393 qualified cases through the sorting and coding process. Based on this approach, the democratic attributes of Chinese grassroots deliberative democracy can be fully assessed using five core coded items (participants, agenda setting, procedural operation, type of theme, and the use of result).

There is selection bias in that the collected cases are almost deemed 'successful' and failed cases often are either not reflected in or removed from the original source. Although we acknowledge this problem, it does not undermine our intellectual effort. It should be made clear at the beginning that the collected cases in this research do not represent all of China, but instead represent the areas where local deliberative democracy experiments have already taken place. Our aim is to assess the degree to which these experiments in deliberative democracy have democratic attributes. Our research question is not whether China as a whole has developed deliberative democracy, but rather whether these areas in which deliberation has occurred have true deliberative attributes.

This paper has five sections. [Section 1](#) reviews and identifies the most important current debates on deliberative democracy in China and locates our study and contribution among these debates. [Section 2](#) describes data sources and discusses reliability issues. [Section 3](#) introduces our intellectual framework for coding, whereby we can make a democratic assessment. Our main findings are presented and discussed in [Section 4](#). [Section 5](#) concludes the main findings and identifies further research issues.

1. Debating deliberative democracy in China

Deliberative democracy has emerged over the past two decades as a complement or even an alternative to electoral democracy. Debates on deliberative democracy have unfolded in democratic regimes (Elster, 1998; Fishkin and Laslett, 2003). Similarly, with significant difference and variation, debates also have developed around whether deliberative democracy can occur in authoritarian countries, including China (He 2006; Hess, 2009; Fishkin, *et al.*, 2010; He and Warren, 2011; Tan, 2013). The very existence of formal and deliberative or consultative participation within an authoritarian structure has challenged core assumptions of nondemocratic governance (Truex, 2017). It seems that deliberative practices can appear within an authoritarian regime led by a party with no apparent interest in

regime-level democratization. By focusing on problems of governance and conflict resolution, authoritarian deliberation operates as a regime strategy for channeling political conflict away from ‘regime-level participation’ and toward ‘governance-level participation’ (He and Warren, 2011). Scholars referred to the trend of deliberative practice as ‘deliberative dictatorship’ (Leonard, 2008), ‘consultative Leninism’ (Tsang, 2009), consultative authoritarianism (He and Thøgersen, 2010), ‘authoritarian deliberation’ (He and Warren, 2011), and ‘networked authoritarianism’ (MacKinnon, 2011).

Scholars have been debating the nature, feature and direction of Chinese public deliberation in the above context. Below is a summary of the main issues that have been debated; many other issues that have been debated cannot be included here for reason of space.

1.1 Debating on deliberation vs consultation

The first issue in the debate involves defining deliberation and whether the term ‘deliberation’ can be used in China. Theorists have different opinions about the normative criteria of deliberation. Mansbridge (1999) sees everyday talk as a form of deliberation; Dryzek (2011), a leading scholar developing a radical theory of deliberative democracy, has a strict requirement for a talk to qualify as ‘deliberation’. For him, deliberation must meet the criteria of authenticity, inclusiveness, and consequentiality for collective matters. He and Warren (2011) view deliberation as a form of public consultation that influences the decision-making process via public reasoning and argumentation. Others argue that the Chinese practice is a type of consultation rather than deliberation and one might question the nature of Chinese political consultative meeting as democratic (Yan, 2011). Sor-hoon Tan understands the conception of authoritarian deliberation by a non-inclusive power and persuasion-based influence (Tan, 2014). Kornreich *et al.* also separate deliberation from consultation, but they view consultation and deliberation as a continuum. In an extreme form, ‘consultation’ is a means of two-way communication employed by governments solely to obtain information. At the other end of the spectrum, ‘deliberation’ implies that governments will do more than collect opinion: they will allow and encourage space for people to discuss issues and to have direct impacts on decisions. When Chinese local governments introduce participatory forums for the purpose of conducting consultation, they reluctantly create space for limited deliberation (Kornreich *et al.*, 2012). This paper will add to this debate by providing a quantitative demonstration of the extent to which grassroots consultation has an impact on decisions, thereby qualifying such consultations as grassroots deliberation.

1.2 Debating whether deliberation has a democratic nature

O’Flynn and Curato (2015) hold the view that even though authoritarian deliberation involves the careful reasoning of decisions, it bears little relation to democracy. In the context of Southeast Asia, Rodan (2018) finds the phenomenon of ‘participation without democracy’ by an examination of public consultation in Singapore, Malaysia and the Philippines. Others hold the view that authoritarian deliberation is more closely related to improving governance than to building deliberative democracy as an intrinsic value. Zhao (2015) finds a type of innovation in the field of social governance centered on participation, which drives the shift from authoritarian governance to a deliberation–cooperation model of governance. Based on an observation conducted in a village in Jiangsu Province, Du Heqi suggests that rural deliberative practice was first utilized as a tool to resolve conflicts. It then became a governing mechanism characterized by information communication, orderly participation and the negotiation of village affairs. Its function subsequently expanded and its structure gradually improved. However, practice deviates from the law, and authoritarian guidance was greater than the democratic elements in the operational process (Du, 2017).

Other scholars believe that democracy has been developing in grassroots deliberation. Grassroots deliberation meets the practical need for public opinion about what is to be done in urban residential communities, and deliberation affects political decision making in the absence of regime-level

democratization in authoritarian states. Fishkin *et al.* (2010) demonstrate empirically how deliberative pooling in Zeguo Township has met all the criteria of deliberative democracy. Fishkin (2017, 2) argues that ‘the method of deliberative democracy is suitable for any kind of polity, so, it can be adopted in China, and takes a positive influence in the same way’. He (2018) demonstrates the formation of deliberative citizenship through one case study of grassroots deliberation; and He and Wang (2018) find that citizen jury has been increasingly used by local governments to deal with petition issues. We will join this debate by developing an intellectual framework whereby we can assess whether grassroots deliberation can be evaluated as either democratic or undemocratic; we also demonstrate the statistical trends behind the uneven development of deliberative democracy in grassroots deliberations.

1.3 Debating the direction of public deliberation in China

The concept of authoritarian deliberation frames two possible trajectories for political development in China. First, the increasing use of deliberative practices stabilizes and strengthens authoritarian rule, and second, deliberative practices serve as a leading edge of democratization (He and Warren, 2011). Regarding and supporting the first possibility, scholars refer to the fact that the scope and impact of deliberation is rather circumscribed at the national level. They argue that the high degree of political risk associated with public deliberation leads the Chinese government to refrain from extending the scope of deliberation. Ma and Hsu (2018) conducted a comparative survey study of citizens’ perception of local elections and public deliberation and determined that citizens in election-driven experimental areas have a higher level of democratic orientation than those in deliberation-led experiment areas. Qin and He (2018) also evaluated and confirmed the demobilization effect of public deliberation, which is that participants’ perception of deliberative quality has a statistically significant negative impact on their political activism.

Regarding the second possibility, Tang (2015) argues that conflicts in Chinese urban residential communities rarely challenge regime legitimacy, as they are largely linked to specific living environments and specific and practical issues rather than addressing the substance of general political and social policies. Kornreich *et al.* through their analysis of China’s health care policy, assert that although the process of deliberative practice is unlikely to produce a democratic transition, it may contribute to better governance (Kornreich, *et al.*, 2012).

However, the tendency toward democracy is clear for other scholars. Enlightened by their case observations, scholars find that members of these communities have faced concrete issues and have acquired the knowledge to resolve their concerns (Unger, Chan and Chung, 2014). Tang (2014) demonstrates that whether deliberative practices will lead to more profound changes toward democratization in China depends on the continuous development of a stronger public sphere, more effective government responsiveness, and improved participatory competence. Some Chinese scholars hold an optimistic view of the prospect of Chinese deliberative democracy (Lin, 2007; Bao, 2013).

We believe that this debate requires more empirical evidence before we can offer any meaningful account of the direction of Chinese deliberation. In this respect, our study aims to first determine how much democracy exists in these deliberative practices from a nationwide dataset.

2. Case collection and evaluation

We used two sources to collect cases. The first source is compiled books. We chose only compiled books, as they aim to collect detailed case studies with sufficient information on completed grassroots experiments or practices. Most of the cases collected in this study came from a collection of the Ministry of Civil Affairs of the PRC that reports 96 cases. In May 2014, the Central Office of the Communist Party of China (CPC) collected distinctive cases on the subject of grassroots-level deliberation in conjunction with the Office of Civil Affairs. This is a nationwide collection of cases with a wide range and representation.

Table 1. Sources of cases

Source of cases	Number	Percentage
Selected typical cases of grassroots deliberative democracy ^a	96	20.6
Compiled cases of Zhejiang grassroots deliberative democracy ^b	97	20.8
Selected cases of Tianjin community social work ^c	80	17.1
Online news cases	193	41.4
Total	466	100.0

393 valid cases remain after we remove unreliable and uncertain cases.

^aEditorial Group (2015).

^bZhejiang United Front Theory Research Institution (2015).

^cTianjin Social Work Association (2017).

In addition to the national collection of cases, we selected the cases of Zhejiang Province and Tianjin Municipality. Zhejiang has been famous for its development of deliberative democracy in China. The case of Zhejiang was written by a designated team composed of the United Front Work Department of the Zhejiang Provincial Party Committee, the United Front Work Department of Zhejiang Province, relevant institutions of higher education, and enterprises. The case materials include vivid and typical factual information. Ninety seven cases were selected.

Tianjin's cases come from the 2015 case report submitted by Tianjin Municipality to the Ministry of Civil Affairs. These cases are provided by professional social workers, social agencies, and clients who have experienced practical deliberation. Eighty cases were selected.

The second source is news reports. Grassroots deliberation cases are reported predominantly by newspapers, which are available online. Thus, we conducted a comprehensive online search in Baidu News using keywords such as 'community', 'village', 'residential committee,' and 'deliberation'. There are an overwhelming number of news reports on grassroots deliberation and we only select 193 cases using the criteria of data requirement developed in the section on coding. Many news reports are not included due to the lack of sufficient information. The whole dataset and their sources are presented in Table 1.

There are many scholarly books whose theme is devoted to deliberative democracy and that contain case studies; however, such works often provide too much theoretical discussion and too little empirical detail. CNKI has also collected academic papers that provide case studies. However, these papers are often incomplete and lack the general information we need. As a result, we decided not to use cases from purely academic books and articles.

In the course of collection, we sorted and coded 466 cases and performed content analysis, thereby creating a preliminary database for further statistical analysis. In the course of coding, we specified the coding requirement, stipulated special cases through trial coding, and trained the coder. In cleaning the database, we first removed cases with poor reliability (including 42 very unreliable and unreliable cases). We then removed very uncertain cases (19 cases) in the coding process. In this way, our case coding resulted in an essentially reliable range and 393 solid cases were obtained.

There are two types of locations where the cases were set: the village and the city community. According to the code, 238 cases are from residential communities and the rest of the cases are from villages. We recorded our deliberation time. There were fewer cases before 2012, with a considerable increase after 2012. Moreover, the collection of cases shows an obvious trend: the number of cases after 2012 significantly increased, a development that is clearly related to the 18th National Party Congress Report issued in 2012. The decreased number of cases in 2016 and 2017 is closely related to the fact that newly occurring cases have not yet been reported. The number of grassroots deliberation cases collected yearly is shown in Figure 1.

2.1 Case reliability check

We consulted with the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the Tianjin Social Workers Association, and other organizers of the case report to ensure the reliability of the cases. We visited the Tianjin Social

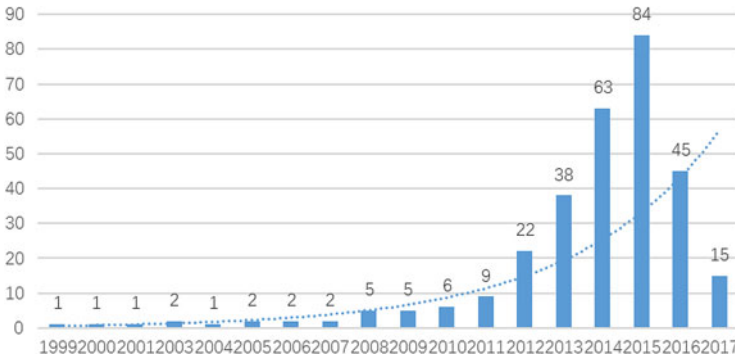


Figure 1. Time trend of grassroots deliberation cases.

Workers Association, spoke with relevant personnel, asked about the case-making process, and verified relevant cases. The credibility of the cases was emphasized and verified through related measures during the collection process. For the collected network cases, we took the keyword as an example to compare various reports, check the authenticity of each specific case from multiple sources, and complement the comprehensiveness of the case according to the requirements of the case coding.

We use the method of the case coder’s judgment and specially designed the subjective judgments of the coders to further check the authenticity of the cases. The case reliability options include very credible, credible, untrustworthy, and very untrustworthy. The other coding options include very sure, sure, not sure, and very uncertain. To increase the reliability of the case, we exclude cases with relatively poor credibility (including 42 very unreliable and unreliable cases). In addition, to enhance the integrity of the credibility of the code, we excluded cases that were very uncertain or uncertain (19 cases).

To better verify the reliability of the cases, we verified the authenticity of 20 randomly selected cases by tracking down the community involved. Three of those cases did not provide contact information, and one case’s organizer refused to accept our request to visit. In the end, 16 case organizations accepted our verification request. We checked the original minutes and files against the case report. We found that all 16 cases truly exist. However, when we checked the reliability of the content of the cases, we were confused by the memories of the respondents. The respondents often did not remember the details of the deliberation. We decided to check the original records to verify the sampling cases. Twelve of the 16 cases have original records. We reviewed the original files and verified their content. These case reports are based on the original record kept in the sub-district office and are largely verbatim, except for some linguistic polishing.

In the verification stage, we found that the case report writers are sometimes more inclined to exaggerate the formation of consensus and satisfaction with the result. In one case, the originally recorded document did not mention ‘reach consensus’, but the case report said, ‘a consensus was achieved’. In the other two cases, the original records did not mention satisfaction, but the reports said that everyone was very satisfied with the deliberation. We also found that the case reports tended to exaggerate the involvement of street-level government to highlight the important role of government or party organizers. However, we seldom found concrete evidence of the substantive involvement of local governments or party organizations in grassroots deliberation. In summary, the randomly selected case check confirms that most cases are true and reliable except for the exaggeration of one or two issues.

Certainly, error arises in the course of case coding. Some cases are subject to missing data, indefinite coding, unreliable items, and other circumstances. There are also some missing data. In some cases, we are unsure about some of the content regarding agenda setting, procedural operation, and the use of results. In a few cases, we cannot identify the actual conditions of deliberation. Although we cleaned the data, there are still defects, namely, incomplete text information and a failure to identify related options. Fortunately, the percentage of such cases is very low and can be negligible.

3. Intellectual framework and coding

Dryzek (2011) established three normative criteria for deliberative democracy: authenticity, inclusiveness, and consequence. Warren (2017) proposed to ask how each practice supports (or undermines) the three functions that together comprise democracy: empowered inclusion, collective agenda and will formation, and collective decision making (Warren, 2017). James Fishkin emphasized that when assessing deliberative democracy, we should investigate whether the government adopts what the people believe and advocate, whether the people are treated fairly, and whether the people can access more information to participate in deliberation. Fishkin believes that although deliberative democracy has different meanings in China, the actual practice of deliberative democracy in China is very close to that of the West (Fishkin, 2017).

We draw on and combine the above theoretical criteria to develop a framework that is more appropriate for our analysis of grassroots deliberative democracy in China. The framework covers five dimensions: the selection of participants, agenda setting, deliberative procedures, deliberative themes, and the use of results. Essentially, we will assess whether grassroots experiments are deliberative though an examination of the information and expression of opinions and whether they have developed democratic procedures. We will assess whether grassroots deliberation experiments are authentic in terms of deliberative themes and whether they address real issues in real life. We will assess whether grassroots deliberation experiments are inclusive through an examination of whether they invite all citizens and all stakeholders to participate or just select a minority group. We will assess whether grassroots deliberation experiments are consequential, that is, whether citizens make decisions about public affairs through social deliberation and whether those decisions are implemented.

The first element of deliberative democracy is ‘people’, or citizens, or the participants in grassroots deliberation. This mainly involves two coded items. First, we investigated who the subjects of deliberation are, including government authorities, self-governed organizations, social organizations, residents, grassroots CPC organizations/CPC members, other democratic parties, People’s Congress Deputies, the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) members, and others. Second, we coded the composition of the citizens participating in the deliberation, including the managers of self-governed organizations, civil servants with a background in the CPC and government affairs, local elites, common residents, CPC organization leaders/members, and others.

The method of selecting participants is an important aspect of investigating Chinese grassroots deliberative democracy. The identity of the people who will participate in the deliberation and the determination of how those people are to be selected will have a strong influence on the democratic nature of grassroots deliberation. This issue primarily involves two coded items. First, who will select the participants in the deliberation, including self-governed organizations, government authorities, CPC organizations, experts, People’s Congress Deputies, and others. Second, how participants are selected, including selected participation, random and voluntary participation, and total participation.

For agenda setting, we mainly investigated two aspects. First, there are four possible reasons for deliberation: the existence of an unresolved dispute; general collective affairs; institutional regulations; and all other reasons. Second, we investigated who initiates or proposes deliberations, including collective managers, government, neutral third party, community CPC organizations, People’s Congress Deputies, and unknown agents.

The establishment and development of deliberative procedures is an important indicator of the maturity of grassroots deliberation and deliberative democracy. Thus, we designed two codes for procedural institutionalization: first, whether deliberation is institutionalized and second, if deliberation is not institutionalized, whether it is convened ad hoc. In addition, we specifically differentiated and coded deliberations without prior stipulation from deliberations with prior stipulation. We further investigated how to establish and develop specific deliberation procedures by interested parties, collective managers (self-governing organizations), the government, neutral third parties, and citizens.

The other dimension of the deliberative procedure is informing and expressing. This is a very important part of investigating the democratic nature of grassroots deliberation, as Dahl explicitly

deemed this standard as an important part of democracy (Dahl, 1997). We designed two coded points to investigate this issue. First, we investigated whether the participant has obtained adequate information using a four-point method, namely, very adequate, sufficient, inadequate, and very inadequate. Second, we investigated whether the participants have clearly expressed their own opinions using a four-point method, namely, very adequate, adequate, inadequate, and very inadequate.

Deliberative themes are also important for evaluating the basic nature of grassroots deliberation. To this end, we designed two coded items. First, we judged the content of deliberation, including public affairs, conflict and dispute, policy implementation, specified requirements, and other proposed matters. Second, we judged the nature of the deliberation business, i.e., whether the participant revises systems and regulations, transacts a matter, and makes a decision.

With respect to the deliberation results and the use of those results, we designed six coded items. Regarding the deliberation results, we aimed to determine whether the parties reach a consensus through public deliberation and whether the parties are satisfied with the results of deliberations. In addition, we investigated whether the parties are satisfied with the results of deliberations, measured by the following four items: (1) all are satisfied; (2) some are satisfied; (3) all are dissatisfied; and (4) uncertain.

Regarding the use of results, we investigated the use of results among the following five outcomes: (1) the report has been presented for reference; (2) the document has been adopted; (3) the decision has been made and directly implemented; (4) the decision has been made, but it is uncertain whether it was implemented or not; and (5) uncertain. We further investigated the person who executes or implements the results of deliberation, including the following six items: (1) self-governing organization; (2) manager; (3) CPC and government organization; (4) social organization; (5) other; and (6) uncertain.

One important issue is whether there was intervention in the deliberation results. We examined two questions. The first question is whether there was intervention in the deliberation results. For this question, we designed the following five options: (1) subject to the intervention of a manager; (2) subject to the intervention of a deliberation leader; (3) subject to external intervention; (4) the absence of intervention, only the deliberation results among participants; and (5) uncertain. If there is intervention in the deliberation results, the items will be coded further to judge the degree of that intervention. Here, an item was designed to capture whether there is intervention in the deliberation results. That item includes the following four items: (1) change the direction of deliberation; (2) affect the direction of deliberation; (3) no considerable influence; and (4) no influence at all.

Table 2 summarizes the main codes and sub-codes of the primary characteristics of grassroots deliberation.

4. Findings

Below we provide a statistical trend regarding five key dimensions of grassroots deliberation. Given the scope and purpose of this paper, we will not conduct statistical testing of some hypotheses, although the statistical figures are available through our coding process.

4.1 Participants

Citizens participate in almost all grassroots deliberations (363, or 92.4%); social groups (150, or 42.61%); and interested parties (218, or 55.5%) also participate. This suggests diversity of the participants in grassroots deliberations. Comparatively, the number of government authorities involved in grassroots deliberations is not high (115, or 29.3%), especially local CPC organizations and CPC members (63, or 16.0%), local people's deputies (10, or 2.5%), and CPPCC members (5, or 1.3%).

Regarding the question of who chooses the participants in local deliberations, of the 393 valid cases, 268 (68.2%) have participants who are selected by self-governing organizations, 57 (14.5%) have participants who are selected by the higher government authority, and four (1.0%) have participants who are selected by experts. Moreover, of the 393 valid cases, the dominant method is selection (359, or 91.3%). All residents' and villagers' meetings involve direct deliberative democracy. However, because

Table 2. Coding

Coding items	Axial coding	Open coding
Subjects	Organizer	The organizer of deliberation The maker of deliberation procedure
	Participants	The subject participating in the deliberation The composition of participants
	Selection of participants	Who selects the participants Selection methods
Agenda setting		Why deliberate? Who proposes the deliberation?
Procedures	Informing and expressing	Whether the participants have obtained adequate information Whether the participants have fully expressed their opinions
	Procedural intervention	If there is any intervention Reason for the intervention Theme of the intervention Effect of the intervention
	Institutionalization	Institutionalization of deliberation Institutionalization of deliberative procedure
Theme		Content of deliberation Nature of deliberation business
Results	Results	If the parties reach a consensus If the parties are satisfied with the result
	Use of results	Use of result Implementation of result
	Intervention of results	If there is intervention in the result Degree of intervention

of the difficulty in obtaining everybody's attendance, the number of people involved in direct deliberative democracy is small; only 15 cases (4%) involve *all* residents or villagers in grassroots deliberations. This finding is consistent with the early findings of an all-villagers' meeting (see He 2007). Moreover, despite scholars' advocacy of a random selection method that has the virtues of fairness, inclusiveness and statistical representation (He 2008; Fishkin *et al.*, 2010), this study finds that randomly selected participants constitute only 4.8% (19). Most of the cases still use selection methods that are subject to manipulation, control, and subjective interpretation.

4.2 Agenda setting

The identity of who has the power to propose deliberations and who selects the issue to be deliberated is one criterion to determine whether grassroots deliberation is democratic. If ordinary people or self-governing organizations have the right to propose deliberations, then they can be said to contain the democratic element of grassroots deliberations; otherwise, such grassroots deliberations have a definite authoritarian nature.

Among the 393 cases studied, most of the grassroots deliberations are proposed by self-governing organizations (219, or 55.7%), interested parties (76, or 19.3%), government (57, or 14.5%), CPC organizations (12, or 3.1%), or People's Congress Deputies and CPPCC members (3, or 0.8%). Fujian Province has ruled that one-fifth of its villagers or one-third of village representatives may jointly request a village-level democratic hearing meeting. However, in practice, citizen-initiated meetings and forums are very rare. Moreover, 5.1% (20) of cases of grassroots deliberations are mandatory because of an institutional regulation or requirement, whereas 32 cases (8.1%) are attributable to controversial issues in which the parties cannot reach a consensus.

4.3 Procedures

A set of democratic procedures is required to develop and deepen deliberative democracy. As early as 2002, Wenling City in Zhejiang decided that townships must hold four democratic roundtables each

year. At the national level, the Chinese government has stipulated the routine procedures of grassroots deliberation: (1) the village (community) CPC organization or village (neighborhood) committee investigates the agenda and determines who should participate in the deliberation by fully soliciting public opinion; (2) the content of the deliberations and related information are reported to the participants in advance through various methods; (3) the deliberations are organized, ensuring that all participants fully express their opinions and present their arguments; and (4) the results are implemented and the participants are provided with feedback on implementation status. It is clear that the organizers are the self-governing organizations and community CPC organizations.

Based on the analysis of 393 cases, there is a high level of institutionalization of grassroots deliberations (279, or 71.0%) and a low level of ad hoc deliberations (114, or 29.0%). It seems that grassroots deliberative democracy has become increasingly institutionalized.

Moreover, there are 241 (61.3%) cases with a set of procedures on how to organize deliberations, whereas there are 127 (32.3%) cases without prior procedural stipulation. Twenty five (6.4%) cases remain unclear with respect to this issue.

In 308 of the 393 cases investigated here, the participants obtained very adequate information (78.4%); 70 cases have adequate information (17.8%); and only 13 cases have inadequate information (3.3%). In the vast majority of the cases, the participants have the opportunity for 'very full expression' (308, or 78.4%), and 'full expression' (70, or 17.8%), whereas only 15 cases (3.8%) do not provide an opportunity for full expression.

4.4 *Deliberative themes*

Chinese grassroots deliberative democracy is a public forum in which citizens address conflict, dispute, and other public matters. Grassroots deliberation is practically oriented in addressing many local conflicting issues, and it plays a limited role in addressing the issues of revising systems, developing regulation, and making a decision. Among the 393 cases, the percentage of deliberative themes concerning conflict and dispute (188, or 47.8%) is close to 50%, while that of other matters accounts for different percentages, for instance, public affairs (83, or 21.1%), policy implementation (24, or 6.1%), specified requirements (8, or 2.0%), and other proposed matters (89, or 22.6%). Moreover, 366 (93.1%) deliberations address concrete matters, a very high percentage. With respect to other deliberation matters, only eight deliberations (2.0%) involve revising systems and developing regulations and 19 (4.8%) involve making a decision. Numerous international organizations have promoted the ideal of active citizenship whereby citizens can develop and revise the procedure and system itself. However, this study finds that such initiatives are quite rare. Chinese grassroots deliberations are largely pragmatic in focusing on daily issues.

4.5 *Deliberation result*

Chinese grassroots deliberations pay more attention to the formation of consensus, which is generally considered to judge whether the case is successful. Of the 393 cases coded here, except for the 57 cases that do not clearly reach a consensus, 335 reach a consensus for the deliberation results, and only one case fails to reach a consensus. Regarding satisfaction with deliberative results, most of the results are satisfactory to all (299, or 76.1%), but 23.9% of the cases do not obtain such a result.

With respect to the use of deliberation results, the coding of cases shows that except for the 60 uncertain cases (15.3%), it is most common for a concrete resolution to have been made and directly implemented (295, or 75.1%). However, other cases note that 'the report has been presented for consultation' (10, or 2.5%), 'the document has been adopted' (14, or 3.6%), or 'the decision has been made, but it is uncertain whether it will be implemented' (14, or 3.6%).

With respect to the implementation of deliberation results, the percentage of the cases in which the result is implemented by CPC and government organizations only account for approximately 20%, while the result is 45.3% for self-governing organizations. Meanwhile, the percentage of the cases

Table 3. Cross-tabulation between the intervention and its effect

Source of intervention	Change the direction	Affect the result	No influence at all	Total
Manager	9	5	2	16
Leader	0	2	0	2
External forces	2	1	1	4
Total	11	8	3	22

coded as ‘hybrid’ is 16.3%: in those cases, the decision is jointly implemented by self-governing organization and other organizations.

Twenty two (approximately 5.5%) of the 393 cases involved intervention in the deliberation results. Ten are subject to strong intervention, while nine are subject to weaker intervention; these interventions led to changing the direction of the deliberations. Nine of the 19 interventions occurred because the parties involved in the deliberations proposed that the government or manager should intervene; five interventions occurred because of a lack of information, and thus the participants sought expert assistance in one-fourth of the total; and the other five interventions involved the interruption of deliberations because of a violation of personal interests that resulted in a request for intervention.

There are three main sources of intervention: manager (16), leader (2), and external forces (4). Of these intervention cases, subject to various interventions, 11 cases (50%) changed the direction of deliberations, three had no influence at all, and eight affected the deliberation results. Table 3 reports the circumstances in which there was intervention in the deliberation result.

5. Conclusion

By collecting and validating the 393 cases of grassroots deliberation, this paper has assessed Chinese grassroots deliberations, confirmed their democratic attributes, and provided a relatively solid statistical result. The full picture is not simple, but rather presents a mixed image. Although there is strong evidence to support the claim that these grassroots deliberation experiments are democratic, there remain variations, nuances, and shortcomings. We earnestly request that readers make their own judgment utilizing the statistical data provided in this article.

Most of the 393 cases of grassroots deliberative experiments are democratic insofar as they address real issues such as conflicts, disputes, and public affairs (366 cases, or 93.1% of the sampling) and have direct impacts on decisions (295 cases, or 75.1%). They are largely inclusive (363 cases, or 92.4%, involve citizens), provide adequate information for citizens (308, or 78.4%), and offer citizens opportunities to fully express their opinions (308, or 78.4%). Chinese grassroots deliberations have an empowerment element with respect to citizens being informed, having an opportunity to express their view, and having deliberation results implemented. Moreover, the institutionalization of deliberation is relatively high (279, 71.0%). More significantly, in the course of deliberation, the extent to which intervention occurs is very small: the deliberation results have been respected and enforced by self-governing organizations in most cases.

Based on the above statistical figures, the judgment that public consultation has no democratic element in an authoritarian state is wrongly assumed. Our research confirms that grassroots deliberation in China contains democratic attributes. China, under authoritarian rule, has developed a type of deliberation with democratic characteristics, so the assumption that deliberation only exists under a democratic polity is invalid.

However, if we adopt a *direct* deliberative democracy perspective, there is much that is needed for Chinese grassroots deliberations to become a fully and comprehensive deliberative democracy. In practice, citizens rarely initiate a deliberative meeting, nor do they revise existing procedures (only eight cases, or 2.0%, concern the revision of procedures). Moreover, randomly selected participants constitute only 4.8% (19), and only 15 cases (4%) involve *all* residents or villagers in grassroots deliberations.

We have developed a new research method for studying grassroots deliberations by collecting and validating the existing case studies, thereby making them a statistical unit. We do find a small percentage error in the process of checking the case report against the original records in our fieldwork. The future study needs to introduce more measures to reduce the level of error and collect more social demographic data for each local community, thus enabling researchers to test some hypotheses regarding the impact of social conflict and economic data on public deliberation (He and Wu 2017).

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