

China's Grassroots Democracy: Development and Assessment

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Abstract

The development of China's grassroots democracy is an important embodiment of China democratic progress. Since the reforms and opening up of the late 1970s, grassroots democracy in China has undergone development along different dimensions, namely from the countryside to the city, from grassroots society to grassroots government, from outside of the ruling party to inner-party democracy, and from democratic election to democratic governance. This development has its roots in the macro reform decisions made by the central government, the possibilities of developing democracy out of China's political system, and also the growing grassroots political awareness and participation. China is a huge country of long history of centralized feudal-autocratic rule. The promotion of democratic politics and the implementation of democratic elections, therefore, require further development in the necessary social conditions. A consensus on the values of democracy and rule of law is yet to be formed, putting grassroots democracy at risks. With the society in transition, and the subsequent growth of plurality of social interests and intensification of social conflicts, the ways that the ruling party governs the country is being challenged. China's leaders are becoming aware of the importance of democracy and law, and are trying to promote a model of election called "public nomination and direct election." This model is an attempt at "leading people's democracy with party democracy," and exemplifies the gradual development of grassroots democracy under the context of long-term dynamic interactions between contending political forces and interest groups.

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JEL classification: *H10, K10, N45, P26*

1. Grassroots Democracy in China's Context

The development of China's grassroots democracy is a political phenomenon that arouses interest from home and abroad. It is also a concrete form of democratic politics with Chinese characteristics. Seen from the level of political system design, grassroots democracy includes mainly three components: first, villager' self-governance organized in the form of the village committee; second, residents' self-governance organized in the form of the community committee (also called the residents' committee); third, staff and workers' self-governance within state's enterprises or governmental institutions organized in the form of the staff and workers' representative congress. China's 1982 Constitution stipulates that "resident committees or villager committees, established by citizens in villages or cities according to their respective localities, are the people's autonomous organizations at grassroots level". In 2007, in the report to the 17th party congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC of the party hereafter), grassroots mass self-governance (*jiceng qunzhong zizhi* 基层群众自治) was elevated to the level of "(a) socialist political institution". Compared with formally written texts, researchers generally have a broader understanding of grassroots democracy. In addition to the village committee and the community committee, the direct elections of people's congresses at both county and town levels, the direct elections of town/township heads, public nomination and selection of grassroots cadres, and the homeowners' committee established by homeowners to protect their rights, are all included in the scope of grassroots democracy (Xu, 2008; Li, 2004a; Shi and Pan, 2008; Read, 2003).

The staff and workers' representative congress and the trade union organization in China, although being important components in the official definition of grassroots democracy, have always been merely used as "transmission belts" between the state and the worker in state-owned enterprises. In fact, they act as "quasi-official organizations", representing the state will, and their major function is to look after the interests and welfare of staff and workers rather than to represent their interests (Unger and Chan, 1995). In the newly developing non-state-owned enterprises (foreign enterprises and private enterprises), the development of the trade union is even slower and weaker. The insignificance of the trade union in these enterprises signifies its inability to represent the interests of the workers. Although there are voices calling for trade union reform, the trade union as a channel for workers to exercise their democratic rights and to realize industrial democracy is still a long road from being realized. The democratic function of the trade union in China's grassroots democracy is, comparatively speaking, negligible.

Therefore, this paper defines China's "grassroots democracy" as follows: "democracy" at "grassroots" level. In China, "grassroots" includes

two aspects, namely grassroots society and grassroots government (*jiceng zhengquan* 基层政权). The former mainly refers to the grassroots areas of self-governance as represented by the community committee and the village committee; the latter refers to state institutions including the governing administration, the CPC committee and the People's Congress at the levels of both county (including the districts in cities (*shixiaqu* 市辖区)) and cities without district jurisdiction (*bushequ de shi* 不设区的市) and town.

The conceptual definition of "democracy" is controversial in both political and academic circles in China. Nevertheless, democracy has remained a major content in the reform policy made by the highest-level of decision-makers in China. Deng Xiaoping once pointed out: "The Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee proposed a series of new policies. There are two most important articles as far as domestic policies are concerned. One is to develop political democracy; the other is to conduct economic reform while reform in other fields is conducted" (Deng, 1993: 116). The key decision-makers in China have always emphasized that "there will be no socialism, nor socialist modernization, without democracy" (Deng, 1994: 168).

Undoubtedly, Deng Xiaoping interpreted "democracy" more from the perspective of exercising effective political energy. To him (Deng, 1993: 242), "the greatest democracy is to motivate people as much as possible." "As for the form of democracy, it depends on the situation." "Motivate people as much as possible" refers to the motivating the people's enthusiasm in constructing a socialist modern country. It requires the acceptance of the legitimacy of the basic political system of China, active participation into the modernization process, as well as support for the ruling party that leads the "reform and open-up" policies. As for the concrete "democratic form" that would motivate the people, it would depend on specific situations. Thus, this democracy differs greatly from the mainstream conception of democracy in western societies that stresses free competition in political elections.

This does not mean, however, that the leadership of China in the reform era ignored the value of democratic politics. In official documents of CPC, "democracy" is categorized into four aspects: democratic election, democratic decision-making, democratic management and democratic supervision,¹ which then can be divided into two dimensions, namely election and governance (decision-making, management and supervision). Among these, "democratic election" is regarded as the primary and fundamental form of democracy, the degree of which decides, or influences, the development of democratic decision-making, democratic management and democratic supervision. In other words, the development of democratic election conditions, to a great extent, the degree of democratic governance.

This paper discusses China's grassroots democratic institutions, including grassroots society (village and community committees) and grassroots govern-

ment (the CPC committee, the People's Congress, and the administration at the levels of county and below). Democratic election will be the main focus of this paper, but it will include discussion on the dimension of democratic governance. Period wise, this paper focuses on the post 1979 era. Even though community/residents committees existed as self-governance organizations guaranteed by the laws, these organizations were in fact not allowed much space of freedom under the totalitarian system in which the state and the society were highly integrated. This paper, therefore, focuses on the practice and logic of evolution of grassroots democracy since the end of 1978 when reforms were initiated.

2. Progress and Dimensions of China's Grassroots Democracy

In the development of China's grassroots democracy, a time gap exists between what is written in the legal texts for institutional design and what is implemented in the real life situation. Generally speaking, it takes a long time for the written laws to be implemented after they were formulated, and this in turns constitutes the space for developing China's democratic politics. From village elections, China's grassroots democracy has undergone a multidimensional expansion, i.e. from the village to the city, from grassroots society to grassroots government, from outside of the ruling party to within the party, and from democratic election to democratic governance. This tendency indicates the growth of China's grassroots democracy in terms of width and depth. China's democratization is in steady progress and is gradually realizing the legitimate political rights of citizens and CPC members in the written laws.

2.1. From Village Democracy to Community Democracy

2.1.1. Village committee elections

The development of grassroots democracy in villages is directly connected to the change of the rural economic structure, the support of the state, and villager's willingness to participate. The household contract responsibility system implemented in the reform era requires the overhaul of the rural collective economic system, as well as the reform of the rural political structure. The idealized "communism", based on the "trinity" of administrative institutions, economic organizations and grassroots society and was realized in the institution of "the People's Commune", found it hard to adapt to the reform of rural economic structure as well as to perform the maintenance of rural grassroots social order after the household contract responsibility system was implemented. The villagers strongly demanded more autonomy.

Beginning in Guangxi Autonomous Region in 1979, many village self-governance bodies such as the village committee came into being in various localities across the nation. These villagers' innovations were approved by the state. 1982 Constitution recognizes the village committee as a legal grassroots self-governance organization. In 1987, the *Organization Law of Village Committees (Trial Edition)* was first issued and implemented.

Since the village committee is a legally defined self-governance organization, its leadership has to be elected, necessitating the beginning of democratic elections in the countryside rather than the city in China, a country with a history that lacks democratic tradition. Since 1983, under the urging of the Ministry of Civil Affairs, village committee elections were put to be put in place in all villages. The *Organization Law of Village Committees (Trial Version)* stipulates that "the director, deputy director and members of the village committee will be elected directly by villagers. Each term of the committee is three years, and the members can be renewed and continued by election." The village committee elections mostly follow the procedures that have been used in the elections of the People's Congresses at county and township levels (Shi and Lei, 1999: 201-234). Fifteen years after the trial version, in 1998, the *Organization Law of Village Committees* was officially issued and promulgated. Standardization of electoral procedures and deepening of democratic nature of such elections could be ascertained. In order to ensure the fairness and justness of the elections, many useful election methods were created by villagers, such as "sea elections (*hai xuan* 海选)", "one-step method (*yi bu fa* 一步法)", "team campaign (*zuhe jingxuan* 组合竞选)", and so on.² The government also established election supervising bodies and legal consultation organizations, and sent election observers to oversee the election procedures. From 2005 to 2007, 623,690 villages across the country had completed their elections. Average rate of completion reached 99.53 per cent. 95.85 per cent of these elections had set up secret voting rooms, and 85.35 per cent of villages elected their leadership without going through a second round. Average turn out rate across the country was 90.97 per cent and 17 provinces experimented with the "sea election" in which villagers voted directly for the candidates.³ Village committee elections have become the most widespread form of democratic practice in China's grassroots society, as well as the most important channels for villagers to participate in politics.

Along with the increase of competitiveness in these village elections, a growing tendency in these elections was that the elite, defined by their wealth or capabilities, usually hold advantageous positions in the elections. Investigations conducted by the Ministry of Civil Affairs in provinces like Shangdong, Hebei and Henan, revealed that over 50 per cent of the village committee members were village elite (Shi and Pan, 2008: 98-99).

In areas where the economy was relatively more developed, like Zhejiang, over 2/3 village committee directors or village committee party secretaries were entrepreneurs, industrialists, merchants, livestock owners, or simply put, the wealthy elite.⁴ Direct elections thus have had the impact of “elite-ization” of the village leaderships, which indicated that increased electoral competitiveness requires the candidates to not only have talents and capabilities but enough resources to mobilize for support. There have also been increasingly more concerns regarding election bribery and the influence of clan forces, which could pose major challenges for the future development of village democracy.

Another factor that complicates the development of village democracy is the reform of the rural tax. In order to relieve the burdens on peasants and to prevent local cadres from taking money from peasants illegally, which resulted in tensions between the people and the government, the central government pushed forward, in 2003, the *Laws on Rural Tax-Fee Reform and Payment Transfer from the Central to the Local Government*. One direct result of this law was the cancellation of the agricultural tax. This policy turned out to be a double-edged sword for village elections: on the one hand, the abolishment of tax-fee collection alleviated people-government tensions, freed the local government from such unpopular tasks and gave village cadres more time to think about the voices and interests of villagers and to conduct village self-governance; on the other hand, the tax reform directly led to the centralization of financial power. “Township finance controlled by the county” and “village finance controlled by the township” have become the norms (Zhou, 2006) while salaries of and subsidies to village cadres come directly from township finance, not from the peasants. Thus, village cadres have become more “administrative”⁵ and the interests and issues that tied the cadres and the villagers began loosening up, which resulted in villagers losing their interest in elections and self-governance gradually (Ren, 2007).

2.1.2. Community committee elections

Seen from the perspective of institutional design, community self-governance in cities and village self-governance in the countryside are regarded as two cornerstones of China’s grassroots democracy. The community committee is “the people’s autonomous organization that conducts self-management, self-education, self-service, and self-supervision” (“Zhongbanfa 23hao Wenjian”, 2000) under the leadership of the CPC. By the end of 2007, the number of community committees reached 81,372. Judging by the progress that has been made so far, grassroots democracy in cities is lagging behind village democracy. In 1982, the community committee as a grassroots self-governance

organization was written in to the Constitution of China. The *Organization Law of Community Committees* was promulgated in 1989, which stipulates that community committee members are to be elected by local residents, household representatives or residents' team delegates. However, it was extremely rare to have members of the community committee to be directly elected by residents before 2000; mostly the personnel at the community committee were arranged by the government, the name "community" did not really live up to its name. Community committees, in fact, were reduced to the role of the "legs" of the grassroots government rather than being the "heads" of community residents. Their major functions were to follow through orders from the government, implement civil welfare policies, resolve disputes, collect data, and pass information to the government. They assisted the government in managing and controlling the grassroots society. Their roles of to express grassroots interests and voices were not as effectively explored as their counterparts in the countryside.

Grassroots democracy in cities, however, has gradually developed along with the progress of the reform and open up, as well as of the market economy. The traditional work unit (*danwei* 单位) system of the planned economy began to disintegrate. Housing reforms that privatize homeownership continued to progress, and increasingly there was a large influx of people into the society who were previously of members in the *danwei* system. The community committee was facing more and more "social persons" (*shehuiren* 社会人) who came from outside of the traditional *danwei* system. Inevitable were the community construction in cities and the reform of grassroots management in the mid and late 1990s. The residents who used to live in the welfare housing, and the community committees that were founded on such welfare housing, were reformed into a new type of community committees, which is now based on private residences regulated by the market. The functions of this new community committee have been expanded and further developed. The new community committee has more residents to look after within its jurisdiction, and the number of committee members has also been expanded to cope with the larger areas of responsibilities. In addition, the work environment and office facilities have improved. More importantly, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, which is in charge of urban community building, also attempted to introduce the election mechanism and methods of the village committees into the elections of community committee. Nationwide, the elections of community committees, although started off later than village committees, made faster progress. Starting from 2000, community committee elections have been introduced gradually in Shanghai, Beijing, Guangdong, Liaoning, Guangxi, Zhejiang and other provinces or major cities. At the end of 2004, there were 71,375 community committees in the whole country. Among them, 43,053 community committees hold elections in that year.

Of these, 9,715 used the direct election method, 12,975 used the household representatives election method, and 22,078 used the residents' team delegates election method (Zheng, 2005). Direct elections took up 22.56 per cent of the total elections in that year.

Direct elections of urban community committee learned from the election method of village committees, while at the same time making their own innovations. Starting from 2006, the Ministry of Civil Affairs encouraged that candidates conduct various campaigns, like public speeches, interviews, wall papers, broadcasts, community LAN and other channels during the process of election. The Ministry also stipulated open counting of ballots and on-the-spot announcement of election results. Considering such factors as the educational background and personal qualities of urban residents, the more convenient transportation network and the better communication infrastructure, urban community democracy appears to have more advantages compared to the social conditions of rural democracy. Yet, the former still lags behind the latter in terms of the degree of participation and competition, as well as the degree of fairness and justice. By 2009, only one third of the provinces had a rate of direct elections of community committees that exceeds 25 per cent. Only ten provinces had a rate of household representatives elections of community committees that exceeds 20 per cent (Shi and Pan, 2008: 358). Two major reasons stand out for this underachievement. The first is the more cautious attitude exercised by grassroots government toward the elections of community committees. Large number of officials is skeptical about direct elections. They are more inclined to designate people they are familiar with or trust as candidates for the community committees, to view the community committee as a channel to move around the officials, and to have members of the government or the ruling party to take up the community committees. Hence, the officials tend to use various means to control the election. The genuine expression of residents' will as represented by the committee election is greatly discounted. The second is the lack of collective property compared with the village committee. Community residents and the community committee have little shared interests. Community residents, especially the younger residents and white-collars, are generally indifferent to community elections. In some areas, a reform known as "separate installation of community-workstation" has been explored. Under this reform, the administrative functions of the community committee will be taken over by the newly established "community workstation (*shequ gongzuozhan* 社区工作站)". The purpose of this reform is to restore the constitutional status and function of the community committee as a genuinely autonomous organization, but in the current China's bureaucratic system, this reform at the end further decreases the authority and influences of the community committee among residents.

2.2. From Grassroots Society to Grassroots Government

2.2.1. Direct election of township head

After twenty years of village's self-government, the reform of direct election of town/township heads in China came into being at the end of 1990s. The elections of the village committees promoted election awareness and trained the ability of democratic participation among the peasants, which provided a firm basis for the direct election of township leaders. Take the town of Buyun in Suining City, Sichuan Province, which took the lead in exploring the direct election of township head, for example. The town's economy was in bad shape, while the government finance was also badly managed, which resulted in a lot of grievances and dissatisfactions among the people. The township head appointed by the upper leadership could neither alleviate the various conflicts in the town, nor gain the trust from the public. The local government thus attempted to reform the system of electing the township head. The procedures were as follows: first, the candidates were identified through recommendation by the public, self-recommendation, and the party's recommendation; then, these candidates were put to vote by members of village committees, village group leaders, and villagers' representatives in a joint meeting, and from this meeting two official candidates would be determined; third, the two official candidates then would compete against another candidate recommended by the local CPC committee for the votes of the people of the town, the winner of this contest would be designated as the sole candidate for township head; finally, as the only candidate, he would be elected by the township people's congress, in accordance to the legal procedure (Zhang 2002). After this reform took place in Buyun town, it was followed immediately in Guangdong, Henan, Guangxi, Jiangsu, Hubei, Yunnan, Chongqing and other provinces or cities. Direct election reforms of township leadership are regarded as an expansion of democratic election from grassroots society to grassroots government. It signals the beginning of the democratization of state institutions, and constitutes the second wave democratic development in China's grassroots democracy after the direct elections of village committees (He and Lang, 2002).

Compared with the election of village committees, the development of the reforms of township head election was by no means smooth. The experimental reforms encountered difficulties and obstacles from the laws, the established political system, and opposing political forces, and were unable to move forward. Seen from the perspective of laws, the township head is to be elected by the township people's congress rather than through direct election of villagers. For instance, after direct election in Buyun town was implemented, criticisms appeared immediately, charging such election violated the Constitution. From the perspective of the system, China is a socialist state

under the leadership of the CPC. It practices the cadre selection system of “the Party controls the cadre” (*dangguan ganbu* 党管干部). The township head, as a leading cadre in grassroots government, must be appointed from within this system. In other words, township head candidates should be nominated or decided upon by the upper level of CPC committee, not from below by the people. Seen from the perspective of politics, one possible consequence of the direct election of the township head is the decrease of the authority of the township CPC committee. The township head enjoys popular support through elections, while the political legitimacy of the CPC secretary appointed from above would be greatly reduced (Huang and Chen, 2009).

Township head election therefore faces several problems. The first is psychological – the fear among many cadres that this reform could undermine the absolute political authority of the ruling party. The second is an erroneous understanding of the reform – the reform is seen to open up an opportunity for the clan forces, black societies or other undesirable forces to legitimize themselves. The third is the limitation imposed by the political system – the reform contradicts the established cadre selection system and the principle of democratic-centralism (Huang and Zou, 2003: 201-208). The township head election reforms took place mostly between 1999 and 2004, after which they basically ended. In spite of all of the setbacks, the reform experiment produced a positive effect in the media and in people’s opinions, which also strengthened the higher leadership’s confidence in continuing pushing for the grassroots democracy. This can be seen in the fact that township election reforms have not totally disappeared, it is just that the direction of this reform later took a turn, from township head election to the election of township party committee. Township electoral reforms now consist mainly of the election reforms for the township party committee. Direct election has been changed to promoting the so-called “public nomination and direct election (*gongtui zhixuan* 公推直选)”, in which case “the people’s democracy” would have to be guided by and based on the gradual expansion of “democracy within the Party”. In addition, some other reforms such as direct election of township Communist Youth League committee and direct elections of party’s delegates to county party congress also came into being.⁶ This paper however will not discuss these reforms because of their limited influence and scope.

2.2.2. *Competitive election of grassroots congress representatives*

The people’s congress system is the basic political system of China. The Constitution stipulates that “All power of the People’s Republic of China belong to the people. The institution through which the people exercise the power of the nation is National People’s Congress and the People’s Congress at all levels.” People’s congresses at the county (district in cities)

and township levels are the grassroots-level people's congresses, and also the base-level organs of state power (国家权力机关). The 1979 *Law of Election of the People's Congress* and the *Organization Law of the Local People's Congress and Local Government* stipulate that representatives of the people's congress at and under the county (district) level are directly elected by the electorates. The *Election Law of the People's Congress*, at the same time, also stipulates the principles of competitive election and of preliminary election of the representatives in grassroots people's congresses. These institutional designs are meant for the people to exercise their rights to vote. In view of the relatively big gap between the urban and the rural economy, as well as the gap in the average literacy and education background between urban and rural residents, the election law also stipulates different ratios of the people's congress representatives between urban and rural constituencies. The ratio at county level people's congress is 1:4. In other words, the average size of the population represented by a rural people's congress representative at the county level is four times the size of the population represented by an urban people's congress representative at the same level. This rate rises to 1:5 at the provincial level and 1:8 at the national level. In 2010, the National People's Congress made amendments to the election law, one of which is the eventual realization of equal representation between the urban and rural constituencies.

The 1979 election laws thus provided the institutional basis grassroots people's congress elections, and inspired the passion for political participation among the people, who had just got out of the chaos of the "Cultural Revolution". Between 1979 and 1981, direct elections of the people's congress at county level were completed in 2,368 counties, about 85.92 per cent of the total number of counties; 96.56 per cent of the total electorate across the country participated in the elections.⁷ The election law also provided the institutional space for citizens' direct and independent participation of politics by stipulating that a candidate can be nominated by three other qualified voters jointly. Such legal provision expanded election competitiveness. In some universities and colleges in Shanghai, Beijing and Hunan at that time, a number of students stood for elections and conducted independent campaigns. They campaigned with certain political ideas, proposed campaign slogans and programmes, delivered speeches, etc. (Xiao, 2008: 410-413) The students' activities were however deemed to be harmful to political stability and against the main idea of the ruling party, the focus on economic construction. This phenomenon, the autonomous participation in people's congress elections, was ultimately unsustainable due to the political situation.

For a long time since then, elections of the people's congress representative were and still mostly are, arranged elections, basically just to confirm candidates that have already been decided by the ruling party. Most candidates

are officials from the party or government at different levels, while some are notable personalities from the society in various fields, whose candidacies are seen as honorary titles bestowed by the party. The openness and competitiveness of elections are totally absent. In spite of this, the institutional arrangement of direct elections for grassroots-level people's congress has already implied the idea that citizens can express their interests and appeals and realize their democratic rights by participating in people's congress elections. Zeng Jianyu, from Luzhou City, Sichuan Province, successfully nominated himself as candidate for a local people's congress election and won the election in 1992; Yao Lifa, from Qianjiang City, Hubei Province, did the same thing in 1995; both of them successfully practiced their rights as citizens.⁸ In 2003, during the people's congress elections in the districts and counties of Beijing, Shenzhen and other localities, many citizens nominated themselves as candidates and competed against the candidates recommended by the CPC. As individual participants, the independent candidates generally speaking, lacked the capabilities to mobilize social resources and financial support. Their campaign activities mainly focused on press conferences (through which they popularized their names and ideas) and organization of campaign teams, distribution of campaign materials and posters to voter. Some also took up legal actions to dispute election results (Tang and Zou, 2003; Zou, 2004; Li, 2004b). After 2003, the phenomenon of independent candidates also appeared in Qianjiang City, Hubei Province and Quanzhou City in Fujian Province.

Compared with the university students running for people's congress elections in the early 1980s, the independent candidates in 2003 in general participated to protect their economic interests; while not discounting they might have their own particular political ideals. Most of them were representatives of the property owners in residential areas. They ran for elections, out of the hope that by getting elected they could raise their political status and increase their influence, so that they can better defend their rights as consumers in economic disputes with real estate developers, property management companies, or even urban planning departments of local governments. Also, the campaign methods of these independent candidates were also more mature and diverse. For example, they kept their campaigns within legal boundary and attempted to resolve election disputes with legal means. Organizing campaign teams was also something creative. Independent candidates running for elections thus provided a push from the society outside of the establishment for the development of China's grassroots democracy, the increase of election competitiveness, and the gradual realization of citizens' voting rights.

Independent participation in grassroots people's congress elections, though not illegal, does not conform to the norms of the establishment and is hardly

supported by the government. In the meantime, these independent candidates also mostly failed in their attempts to win the votes and sympathy of the majority of voters, due to their lack of social prestige, political resources and publicity channels. However, the legacy left behind by their participation is by no means insignificant. Some election issues that appeared during the 2003 elections, such as how should campaign activities and election mobilization be regulated and how formal candidates should be determined from numerous preliminary candidates, were responded to in the amendments to the nation's election law in 2004. The amended law stipulates that if there are too many preliminary candidates in the direct election of grassroots people's congresses and if formal candidates are still undetermined after the consultation process, a preliminary election is allowed to determine the list of formal candidates. Also stipulated in the amendment is that candidates should meet the electorate before the election and answer voters' questions.⁹ Citizens' independent participation in these elections in fact pushed forward the improvement of the people's congress election system. It can also be concluded that the development of grassroots democratic politics requires both the adjustment of political decisions at the macro-level, and the independent participation on the part of individual citizens (Huang and Chen, 2005).

2.3. From outside of the Ruling Party to within the Ruling Party

As the ruling party of China, the CPC sets up the party committees from the central level to the local level. These party counterparts to the same-level governments are to "oversee all and coordinate every aspect" (*zonglan quanju, xietiao gefang* 总揽全局、协调各方), in short, to play the role of core leadership. The party also establishes party organizations in grassroots administrative institutions and grassroots self-governance organizations to exercise political leadership. In other words, grassroots organizations of the CPC in countryside exercise the political leadership of township governments and village committees. They are institutions in which the party uses to serve the people and carry out their work. According to the party's constitution and the *Temporary Regulations of the Communist Party of China regarding the Election of Grassroots Organizations* (*zhongguo gongchandang jiceng zuzhi xuanju gongzuo zanxing tiaoli* 中国共产党基层组织选举工作暂行条例), the leadership of grassroots party organizations is determined through competitive elections in either the party conference or the party representatives' conference at the same level. The nomination of candidates is the responsibility of the party committee of the previous term, which needs to be approved by the upper level party organization or to be approved by the presidium of the conference. In actual practice, ordinary party members and non-party citizens have basically no opportunity to participate in the nomination of leadership

candidates. The party's elections are parts of the party's cadre selection system, which does not have competitive functions.

With the progress made in elections of the village committee and the township leadership, the selection system of grassroots party organization leadership faces pressure from outside the party to address its own deficiency in democracy. If villager' self-government and township head elections continue while the methods of electing grassroots party leadership are left untouched and unreformed, the political authority of grassroots party organizations will be diluted. In order to strengthen the popular support for grassroots party organizations, the "two-ballot system" (*liangpiao zhi* 两票制) in the election of village party branches and the "public nomination and direct election" (*gongtui zhixuan* 公推直选) reform in the election of township party leaders came into being.

2.3.1. "Two-ballot system" in village party branch elections

The emergence of "two-ballot system" is related to the erosion of the authority of village party branch as a result of direct election of the village committee. The village committee, through electoral procedure, has the support of the majority of villagers; the village party branch is however elected only by village party members. Its authority is therefore less well-grounded than the village committee. In the face of such the village committee with public support, the village party organization faces being marginalized. In some places, the conflicts between the "two committees," even escalated into violent conflicts between members of the village committee and members of the village party organization (Jing, 2004; Guo and Bernstein, 2003). Grassroots party branches, therefore, began to explore reform measures that could enhance their own popularity; this is where the "two-ballot system" came in. The so-called "two-ballot system" election is to "vote twice" in the election of village party leaders: The first vote is by all villagers regardless of party membership to determine the preliminary candidates for the leadership posts of the party organization, then the party organization will determine the formal candidates from the tallies of these votes; the second vote is the vote by all party members, in an all-village party conference, that will determine the leaders through anonymous ballots.

The adoption of the "two-ballot system" extends the scope of nomination from within the party to outside of the party. It therefore expands the support of public opinion, enhances the degree of democratization in the election of village party leader, and strengthens the legitimacy of the political leadership of the village party branch. In many places, on the basis of the "two-ballot system", some party leaders enjoy popular support not only among party members but also among the villagers. These leaders are then recommended

for the election of village committee members. This is an effective way of “inner party democracy” leading “the people’s democracy”.

2.3.2. “Public nomination and direct election” in township party committees

The experimental direct elections of township heads also created similar issue of the conflicts between the “two committees” as in villages. Direct elections of the township head may have strengthened the legitimacy of the township head, but may also have resulted in the decline of township party committee’s authority. The township government would conduct its work under the elected township head rather than under the directions of the party committee. In such situation, tensions and power struggle between the township government and the township party committee could happen (Zhongong Sichuansheng Zuzhibu Ketizu, 2003). In other words, the reform of democratic elections of grassroots government cannot be separated from the political context it operates, as it could post serious challenges to the leadership of the party at the grassroots levels. And this is the reason such reforms have been heading into difficulties. It was under this background that the reform of township head elections evolved into the “public nomination and direct election” of township party committees.

“Public nomination and direct election” evolve from the “two-ballot system”. Similar reforms are also being explored in many localities, with different names such as “twice nomination and one election” (*liangtui yixuan* 两推一选), “direct recommendation and direct election” (*zhitui zhixuan* 直推直选), “sea recommendation and direct election” (*haitui zhixuan* 海推直选), and others. All of them basically have three major steps: (1) Preliminary candidates are recommended by the people and the party members. In addition to party’s organizational recommendation, qualified individual party members are allowed to recommend themselves, while joint recommendations by party and non-party members are allowed. (2) The party will conduct an evaluation process of the preliminary candidates that involves examination of candidates’ qualifications, democratic evaluation, and discussions by the leaders. Formal candidates will be determined in this stage on the basis of tallying the opinions collected in the evaluation process. (3) Finally, in accordance with the electoral procedure, an all-township party conference or party representatives’ conference is convened for all party members to directly elect the leaders of the township party committee.

Compared with the traditional selection procedure in which township party leaders are selected by the upper-level party organizations, “public nomination and direct election” expands the list of candidates for township party committee leadership. There are more ways for nomination to take place other than recommendation by the upper-level party organization. The

determination of formal candidates has to follow procedures that reflect public opinion, before these candidates are put to direct vote by party members. The role of public participation is expanded in the important process of nomination, and is therefore regarded as a major step toward democracy within the party.

Therefore, in current practice of “public nomination and direct election”, the ballots of ordinary party members and of the non-party people have become necessary for a candidate to secure a leadership position, although the votes by themselves are not sufficient. Those who wish to get elected, in addition to basic qualifications and credentials, would now have to win “public recognition”, such as securing enough support of the people in the processes of nomination and democratic assessment by the people, capturing enough support from party members or representatives of party members, and obtaining the majority of votes in the final step of election. Election, to a certain degree, enhances the trustworthiness of the leadership in the eyes of party members and the people. In making public policies or large-scale projects, officials would have to change their arrogant, arbitrary ways of work and to learn to patiently discuss with the ordinary party members and non-party members (Duan, Yang and Liang, 2006).

This reform measure of “public nomination and direct election” is successful. It has found the perfect balance between insisting on the leadership of the party and pushing forward grassroots democracy. This election measure ensures public opinions inside and outside of the party would be taken into account to. The upper-level party organization could also easily identify those party cadres who have the support of the people and the party and recommend them to important posts in township government. The implication is that party leaders will be first elected through “public nomination and direct election”, and from them some leaders would be selected to fill in the posts of peoples’ congress representatives, director of the congress standing committee, and town head through the legal procedure. The political legitimacy of the township party committee and its secretary, as well as the leadership role played by the party over the township government and township people’s congress, would be secured under such process. This reform thus signifies the CPC’s wish to guide and direct people’s democracy on the basis of expanded party democracy.

“Public nomination and direct election” as a reform measure has won the approval of the highest level of decision makers in China, as it promotes grassroots democracy while maintains the political leadership of CPC. This type of reform expands rather quickly. Nancheng town, of Qingshen County in Sichuan Province, took the lead in 1999 to practice public nomination and direct election in the determination of its township party committee. This was followed by provinces like Hubei, Jiangsu, Yunnan, Jilin, Chongqing,

and others. Before 2007, “public nomination and direct election” mainly was to be found at the level of township party committees, and Sichuan and Jiangsu were two provinces that conducted this reform in the greatest numbers in their localities. In the 17th CPC Report, party secretary Hu Jintao urges cadres to “popularize the method that combines party members’ and the people’s recommendation with upper party organization recommendation in determining the leadership of grassroots party organizations, gradually expand the scope of direct election of grassroots party organization leadership, and explore multiple forms of realizing grassroots democracy within the party.”¹⁰ “Public nomination and direct election” thereafter has been widely applied to the elections of CPC’s various grassroots organizations, including some CPC organizations in private enterprises. There are signs indicating that it can be adopted by higher levels of party hierarchy. Guiyang City, in Guizhou Province once tried this method in the election of a district (county) party secretary in 2008, and Shenzhen in Guangdong Province also introduced this method in the elections of some of the representatives of the municipal party representatives’ conference and the elections of some members of the municipal political consultative conference in 2010. This reform has increasingly become the main form of electoral reforms in China’s grassroots democracy.

2.4. From Democratic Election to Democratic Governance

The development of grassroots democracy includes not just the institution of democratic elections, but also the development of democratic supervision, democratic decision-making and democratic management, which we demarcate as democratic governance. While democratic election at grassroots level is continuously being pushed forward, grassroots democratic governance is also being explored in various localities.

In the countryside, villagers creatively establish various means of democratic participation to reinforce the supervision of village cadres since the reform of village committee elections, including the village council, village deliberative conference, and village supervisory committee and other organizations to demand for more openness of village affairs and village finances. Some places are even exploring referendum as means to involve villagers’ direct participation. Accordingly, major issues of the village such as management and distribution of the village’s collective property, public welfare, the use of homestead, among others, are to be democratically decided through votes by all villagers in the village.

The rise of the property owners committee (*yezhu weiyuanhui* 业主委员会) in many cities complements the existing community committee and takes up some of the functions the community committee is unable to perform, and also further reinforces urban grassroots democracy. Unlike the

community committee, which is not economically well-tied to the interests of community residents, the property owners committee is important to many community residents who are property owners. After commercialization of residential housing, the core interests of property owners in a community lie in the properties they own, which are also their lifesavings or future-lifesavings bought with a loan. If these property owners have disputes with the real estate developers, property managers, or local housing authorities, the community committee in general is unable to speak effectively on behalf of the property owners. Property owners thus resort to organizing the property owners committee to defend their own interests. This has become widespread in many of the big and medium-sized cities in China. According to the statistics provided by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, by the end of 2007, 22 per cent of the communities in China's cities had established property owners committees (Li, 2008). For protection of property value, these property owners committees have to interact frequently and in complicated ways, sometimes cooperatively and sometimes in adversarial manner, with other actors in communities, such as property management companies, real estate developers, community committees, community party branches, governmental street offices, and others. The interest-based close relationship between property owners committees and property owners has made these committees important organizations for property owners' self-governance (*yezhu zizhi* 业主自治) and for community self-governance. The property owners committee helps to articulate the property owners' interests, inspires greater political participation, and therefore promotes the development of grassroots democracy in cities (Li, 2009).

At the township level, "democratic talk" (*minzhu kentan* 民主恳谈) is regarded as a form of democratic politics unrelated to election but closely related with democratic decision-making, management and supervision by common villagers over township and village affairs. "Democratic talk" first appeared in 1999 in Wenlin City, Zhejiang Province. It operates generally in the following procedure. First, the township government convenes a "democratic hearing assembly" (*minzhu tingzhenghui* 民主听证会), to be participated by both villagers and township leadership to discuss "important work programmes of the party committee and the government, planning and adjustment of township and village administration, major projects, issues the people strongly feel that the party and government should deal with, and other important issues that involve the interests of the people". After carefully listening to the ideas and opinions of the people, the township leadership will then make decisions on the spot (CPC Wenqiao Township Committee and Wenqiao Township Government, 2002: 44-45). As "democratic talk" expands, its contents and forms have also changed. In some towns in Wenlin city, like Xinhe town and Zeguo town, it has evolved into a mechanism to supervise the budget of the town government by the town people's congress.

Town people's congress representatives and voters from the town can jointly convene a democratic talk assembly to deliberate and decide on the budget items of the town government. The reports of the talk assembly will then be submitted to the formal meetings of the people's congress for discussions and decisions. Hence, although unrelated to election, the democratic talk does improve grassroots democracy (He, 2007).

In some cities in China, reform measures that will improve the operation and working mechanisms of the grassroots people's congress are also being explored. Being a representative in the people's congress is not a full-time, professional job. The representatives only exercise their duties only when the people's congress is in session. There are no systematic channels in which the representatives interact regularly with the voters in their constituents. In recent years, Shenzhen has pioneered new institutions to increase representative-constituents interaction through the setting-up of the "people's congress representative office" (*renda daibiao gongzuoshi* 人大代表工作室) and the "people's congress representative contact workstation" (*renda daibiao lianlu gongzuozhan* 人大代表联络工作站). The former is to let representatives at all levels to have a standardized system to meet visiting voters at regular time and place, listen to their opinions, understanding their ideas, accept their supervision, and convey public views to the government. It is a bridge that links up the common people with the government and the people's congress. The latter invites public spirited community leaders to work voluntarily as assistants of the people's congress representatives of their communities, so that these representatives are able to meet regularly with the community voters in their constituencies. The community leaders volunteering in the workstation also help the people's congress representatives to understand better social conditions in the communities, aggregate public opinions, and draft proposals (Zou, 2007). The workstation therefore connects the community residents with the people's congress representatives. The "people's congress representative office" and the "people's congress contact work station" effectively channel the demands for political participation from outside of the established system to inside the system in stable and orderly manner. They also promote the democratic functions of the people's congress in articulating, aggregating and adopting public opinions. They are fully approved and eagerly popularized by the local government, and inspire some representatives of the local party conferences and members of the political consultative conferences to use similar means to enhance their contact with the common people. Such innovations also increase the contribution to grassroots democratic development by the main bodies of the existing political system in China.

With the development of China's economy and society, the cheap labour advantage, which for a long time has fueled the high-speed economic growth, is going through a major change. Workers are increasingly aware of their

rights and demand more participation. Waves of strikes to protest low pay in Guangdong, an economically powerful province, were seen here and there in recent years, which resulted in the relatively large-scale pay raise in the province's enterprises. This tendency has got the attention of the China's leaders. In 2010, the provincial government of Guangdong issued the *Guiding Opinions regarding Strengthening Human Concerns and Improving Working Environment*. The document supports the collective negotiation power of the employees over pay matters, encourages workers' contribution of ideas and advices to enterprises and their participation in the democratic management of enterprises, pushes forward the role of the trade union in China to become the truly "representative" and "spokesperson" of workers' interests, demands the improvement of trade union election, and proposes the professionalization of trade union staff and its recruitment system.¹¹ With this document, China's official trade union may be changed to more effectively adapt to the changes of China's economic growth patterns and to answer the appeals of the workers to share the fruits of such growth.

3. China's Grassroots Democracy: Impetus and Predicament

Viewing the last 30 years of China's grassroots democracy, one could easily conclude that grassroots democracy has become the primary experimental field for direct election, the major channel to train citizens' democratic skills and consciousness, and the most important sign of democratic progress in China. The moving forward of grassroots democracy has its own inner momentum. At the same time, it could not be separated from the strategic planning of the party and the government to open up the field of grassroots democracy and the innovative moves of local officials. However, compared with the heated discussion of China's grassroots democracy 10 years ago, the current development of grassroots democracy is trapped in impasses. There is a growing gap between people's expectation of democracy and the numerous problems in the actual development of grassroots democracy. Consequently, the enthusiasm for grassroots democracy at all levels, from the central to the local governments, from the political to the academic circles, and from the government to the public, is decreasing. Some people have even lost their confidence in grassroots democracy.

3.1. Grassroots Democracy Development Driven by the Government and the Public

The initial development of grassroots democracy in China benefited from the double push from the government and the public. Seeing from the perspective of the government, the ruling CPC took the promotion of grassroots

democracy as an important step in augmenting its political legitimacy. While the maintenance of general social stability and high-speed economic growth ensures its effective ruling position, the CPC also has kept on exploring and reforming the election system at grassroots levels to reinforce and enhance its public support. Increasingly the Chinese government agrees with the mainstream values like democracy, rule of law, and human rights. It has joined the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (1997) and the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (1998). The 16th CPC Report, while insisting not to fully copy the western political model, nevertheless proposes to “learn from the fruits of human political civilizations”. Since the 15th CPC Congress, China’s key leaders had insisted on expanding grassroots democracy as the most widespread and fundamental practice of socialist democratic politics.

In addition, many grassroots democratic reforms, such as the reform of township head elections and “public nomination and direct election” of township party committees, were also used by local officials as means to create political accomplishments (*chuangzao zhengji* 创造政绩). In some less-developed areas, local officials attempted to improve local governance by developing grassroots democracy and elections. Although such measures were unlikely to change local economic predicament quickly, they could contribute to people’s trust in the cadres and alleviate the tense relationship between the people and the government. When local officials were unable to impress politically by developing the economy, or when there were inadequate financial muscle to “buy peace” (*huaqian mai taiping* 花钱买太平) like what economically-developed areas did when facing conflicts from different interests, local officials would have to resort to promoting grassroots democracy to deal with such interests and conflicts and political reforms to escape from governance predicament (Li, 2003), even if such approach is filled with risks and uncertainties.

Seeing from the perspective of the public, the drive of common people to participate in the election and governance of grassroots democracy first came from people’s awareness of their interests since the reforms, which was then constantly reinforced by marketization. Out of the need to defend their own interests, the people gradually realized the necessity to defending their interests with their own political rights, and as a result their demand for political participation became increasingly stronger. Secondly, the spread of modern political culture improved people’s democratic awareness. As social science knowledge became popularized and the state became increasingly open, political values like democracy, ruling of law, human rights, competition and equality were spreading out to the population. Thirdly, the gradual growth of the civil society was also an important drive for the development of grassroots democracy. The property owners committee in the cities and other

various forms of social organizations were emerging, which pointed to the fact that, under the conditions of the market economy, citizens were organizing themselves to defend their own rights. Increasingly, the people would start to pay more attention to not just private but public affairs, and they would defend not just their individual rights but collective rights through organization.

3.2. Predicament and Adversities in China's Grassroots Democratic Development

After 30 years of development, grassroots democracy is experiencing “growing pains” too. Chinese civil society development is still at the early stage, the rule of law in the society is still underdeveloped, and the social conditions for a nationwide electoral democracy are still lacking. Election bribery and penetration of the black societies in village committee elections have not been dealt with effectively. The rate of direct election in community committees is still too low; it has not yet reached one third of the total. Not only most of them are controlled or interfered by the government, residents also have not had much concern about the elections. “Public nomination, direct election” for township party committee has been in repetitive experimentation stage and yet to be formalized and standardized. Direct elections of grassroots people’s congresses, while clearly stipulated and written in the laws, still have factors outside of the written laws that keep obstructing independent participation in elections. There are multiple factors that contribute to this situation.

First, there is the inconsistency between grassroots democracy development and the macro-level political system. The development of grassroots democracy is eventually restricted by the present political system. Grassroots democracy will not be able to proceed further if the macro-level political system is not reformed. After thirty years of experimentation, direct elections are still in place only at the levels of grassroots society and grassroots government. Elections above the level of county are still the traditional indirect elections. The principles of “party controls the cadres” and democratic centrism still guide the appointments from above of all major leaders at various levels. If this is not reformed, the experiment of direct elections at grassroots level will basically always remain under the imposed “ceiling” from above.

Second, alternating party rule, economic recession, and disorders of political situation caused by democratization in former Soviet Union, Eastern European countries and Taiwan also resulted in the wariness of introducing more democracy in China among not just the political and academic circle in China, but even in some circles of the society. Without the strong foundation of a developed civil society, a hastily developed electoral democracy would result in the rise of irrational populism. In order to maintain high-speed economic growth and continuous political stability, the Chinese government

has to maintain a balance between many values, including state interests, economic growth, social order, citizen freedom and political democracy. The authoritarian model in some East Asian states such as Singapore, therefore, becomes a model for the Chinese government to learn from. Doubts and worries regarding the electoral democracy also appear in the academic circle in recent years, including the criticisms of universal values,¹² the proposal of government based on rule of law but without democracy (Pan, 2003), and critical reflections on elections.¹³ These skepticisms indicate that a good number of Chinese scholars are doubtful of the appropriateness of western-style democracy or electoral democracy in China.

Third, many local officials are simply not interested and motivated to develop grassroots democracy. In official performance assessment, economic growth and social stability rank the highest. The former decides the future career of the official; the latter decides whether the official can maintain his current position. Democratic elections subject the grassroots cadres to the supervision of the people rather than the upper leadership, which may result in the tensions between the local officials appointed by the upper leadership and the local cadres elected by the people. Many local officials, therefore, are passive toward grassroots democracy.

Fourth, the desirable outcomes brought forth by grassroots democracy are yet to be certain. Grassroots democratic development certainly helps in the realization of citizen's democratic rights and in increasing trust between the people and officials, which in turn also promotes the sense of responsibility among the grassroots cadres. However, the under-development of rule of law and the long tradition of rule-by-people (*renzhi* 人治) in China, combined with the introduction of competitive elections, will bring forth many negative impacts, including bribery, clan conflicts, and the interference from black societies (Lu, 2009; Xiao and Wang, 2009; Yu, 2004). While it can be argued that clan influences and black societies are not necessary the by-products of elections (they exist with or without elections), and election bribery is no different from the buying and selling official positions in the current cadre selection system, such negativities nevertheless still have shaken the confidence in grassroots democracy among some cadres and common people. For many people in a developing country, pursuits of economic interests are still seen as more practical than demands for more democracy.

Finally, there is a contradiction between "constructed democracy" (*jiangouxing minzhu* 建构型民主) and "inborn democracy" (*neishengxing minzhu* 内生型民主). Upon closer observation, the many dimensions of the development of China's grassroots democracy can be divided into two major types: inborn democracy and constructed democracy. Inborn democracy includes villagers' self-governance, independent participation in grassroots people's congress elections, the property owners committee, and the people's

congress representative workstation. All of these have strong support from the public and are led by effective local opinion leaders. Constructed democracy includes community committee elections, township elections, and others. These are democratic reforms initiated under the direction of the ruling party and the government. The people's participation in constructed democracy is weak and passive. At the urban community level, the contradiction between inborn democracy and constructed democracy form is especially obvious. On the one hand, community residents are generally indifferent to government-guided community committee elections; on the other hand, resident property owners actively participate in the property owners committee, which has been facing various restrictions imposed by local authorities. Such contradiction reveals the contradictory attitude of the government and the party toward developing grassroots democracy: they want to the development of grassroots democracy to be under their effective control so that people's demands and appeals for participation can be brought into the established institutionalized channels, and yet they are worried that independent political participation of the people will result in social instability and threaten the authority of the ruling party.

Broadly speaking, the key dilemma of China's grassroots democratic development is this: On the one hand, there are high expectations of democratic politics, which is seen to be able to reinforce the existing system, prevent corruption, select the able officials, coordinate different interests, balance different conflicts, and promotes harmony. Once it is found that democratic politics is not a "cure" to all social diseases, confidence and passion in democratic politics decrease. On the other hand, the social foundation for the development of China's democratic politics is still weak, including the weak sense of the rule of law among both the government and the people, and the slow development of civil society. Many preconditions for electoral democracy are still being developed. Therefore, it is inevitable that negative effects will emerge in the practice of grassroots elections, which consequently also dampen the faith in grassroots democracy, or even the general applicability of democratic politics in China, of some officials and people. Hence, under the present situation, in which there is still no consensus on how to judge the value of democracy, especially electoral democracy, in Chinese society, there are many obstacles in developing grassroots democracy, not to mention the instinctive objection of the vested interests group in the current political system.

4. General Evaluation of China's Grassroots Democratic Development

The development of China's grassroots democracy is a major area of democratic progress in China in the reform era. Its institutional evolution is manifested in the development from the countryside to the city, from

grassroots society to grassroots government, from outside the ruling party to within the ruling party, and from democratic election to democratic governance. Grassroots democracy is encouraged by both the central leadership and by the wide participation of the people. If the democratic progress of China's macro-level political system is manifested in the identification with democratic values in official texts and political publicity, the democratic progress at the grassroots level is concretely expressed in the actual level and degree of development of grassroots political participation by the people.

4.1. Developing Grassroots Democracy Is a Strategic Move for the Reinforcement of CPC's Ruling Foundation

Since the opening-up and reform, China's decision-makers have been determined to develop democratic politics gradually under the conditions of maintaining stability and economic growth and in accordance to the national conditions of China, in order to have the legitimacy of the party's ruling status more firmly grounded. When summarizing the lessons learned from the tragic "Cultural Revolution", Deng Xiaoping pointed out that "politically speaking, the democracy of the people should be fully employed to make sure that the people as a whole can truly enjoy the rights to participate in the management of the state through various effective means, especially the management of local government and enterprises, and to enjoy all citizen rights" (Deng, 1994: 322). Jiang Zemin regarded "expanding grassroots democracy" as "the widest practice of socialist democracy",¹⁴ and he encouraged orderly political participation so that democratic politics can be institutionalized, standardized, regularized. Hu Jintao emphasized people-based politics, as well as the all-round sustainable development of the economy, politics, society, culture and the environment. Democracy and rule of law are acknowledged as the principal elements in constructing a harmonious society. He also pointed out that the "grassroots self-governance system, which is energetic and led by grassroots party organizations, should be perfected, the space of grassroots self-governance should be expanded, and democratic management system should be improved, so that both in both urban and rural areas, living communities that are orderly, well-managed, with good services, and civilized can be built."¹⁵

The above discourses from Chinese leaders indicate that they have always regarded the development of grassroots democracy as a foundational work for the construction of a Chinese-style socialist democratic politics. On the basis of social stability, economic progress, and performance-based legitimacy, reforms of China's grassroots democratic elections have been undertaken to reinforce the popular support and procedural legitimacy of the party and to respond to the increasing demands for participation by the people.

In recent years, China's decision-makers are highly alert to the series of major challenges confronting the CPC and the state, and also have a strong sense of governance crisis, especially when it comes to the widespread official corruption and the growing gap between the rich and the poor. On the one hand, the state's financial power is growing rapidly and the government is in possession of great quantity of resources; on the other hand, power is highly centralized and lacks effective supervision, which has been around for a long time and has never been changed for the better. The common people's mistrust of the local government is spreading, and collective riots happen frequently. Therefore, the party admitted very frankly in the 4th plenary session of the 16th Party Congress that "the ruling position of the party is not inherent, nor secure forever. We must be prepared to deal with the dangers while we are safe, strengthen our crisis consciousness, and learn from the rise and fall, successes and failures, of other ruling parties in the world so that we can strengthen our construction of ruling capability." The party also demanded "scientific, democratic, and law-based governance" (*kexue zhizheng* 科学执政、*minzhu zhizheng* 民主执政、*yifa zhizheng* 依法执政). Continuously pushing forward the development of China's grassroots development is therefore a strategic move by the party to secure its ruling position.

4.2. The Development of China's Grassroots Democracy Still Has an Immense Space

The political framework embodied in the formally written laws in China has actually provided an immense space for the development and practice of grassroots democracy. China's Constitution, the *Law of Election*, the *Organizational Law of Local Governments*, the *Organizational Law of Village Committees*, the *Organizational Law of Community Committees* and the *Constitution of Communist Party of China* all specify a wide scope of political rights enjoyed by Chinese citizens and members of the CPC. As long as these rights are effectively protected and fully exercised, huge improvement of China's grassroots democratization is possible. The democratic rights of Chinese citizens and members of the CPC, especially the right to vote, for a long time have not been, and still are not, effectively and fully exercised, nor are they any rules or regulations to protect the exercise of these democratic rights. A system of legal appeals for the people to protect their democratic rights is still lacking.

Therefore, the development of China's democratic politics requires continuously improving laws and regulations and, more importantly, a true respect for the laws. By enhancing the culture of rule of law in the society, putting in the efforts to discover and activate the democratic elements

within the existing political system, and putting into political practice the citizens' legal rights provided in the written texts of laws, China's grassroots democracy still has an immense space to develop. Many vital and innovative measures of reform in grassroots democracy in various localities across the country are actually implementation rules to realize the rights of citizens and party member and re-discovered channels of interest articulation within the current political framework.

4.3. The Main Characteristic of China's Grassroots Democratic Election Is "Public Nomination and Direct Election"

Democracy can take many forms, but the most basic one is undoubtedly the system of election. It institutionalizes and quantifies the expression of public opinion. It embodies "people's sovereignty" and "all power of the People's Republic of China belong to the people". China's leaders, therefore, place "democratic election" ahead of "democratic decision-making, democratic management and democratic supervision,"¹⁶ and the "right to vote" ahead of "the rights to know, to participate, to express, and to supervise" (*zhiqing quan* 知情权、*canyu quan* 参与权、*biaoda quan* 表达权、*jiandu quan* 监督权).¹⁷

China's leaders have always searched for a "Chinese-style" democratic election system. "Public nomination and direct election" developed from grassroots democratic practice is increasingly approved of and promoted by the government, and could be the Chinese-style model of democratic election the leadership is seeking. This model effectively embodies the party's guiding principle for developing socialist democracy, which is "the organic unity of the leadership of the party, the people being their own masters, and rule of law," (*dangde lingdao, renmin dangjia zuozhu he yifa zhiguo sanzhe youji tongyi de yuanze* 党的领导、人民当家作主和依法治国三者有机统一的原则).¹⁸ The initial stage of candidate recommendation exemplifies public opinion and people's participation. The second stage of determination of formal candidates on this basis of party's assessment of the candidates exemplifies the party's leadership. The final stage of voting in accordance with the legal procedure exemplifies the rule of law. The three stages of the model embody the three elements of the "organic unity", and hence are fitting to the current developmental needs of China's political democracy. The model is gradually promoted in grassroots democratic practices and even can be expanded to higher level of political elections. One could argue that "public nomination, direct election" is the linking chain between CPC's traditional top-down cadre selection system and the bottom-up election system. It allows the traditional cadre selection system to absorb the electoral elements and provides an institutional platform to realize Deng Xiaoping's ideal of

selecting cadres who are “supported by the people”. It makes party’s cadre appointments more reflective of quantifiable public support.

4.4. The Development of China’s Grassroots Democracy Is a Long-term Game between Various Political Forces

The development of China’s grassroots democracy is driven by social and economic development and the people’s political participation since the reform and opening up, and it is also reflective of the long-term game between various political forces. It is a gradual process.

On the one hand, Chinese people’s needs and ability of political participation are growing. Democratic politics is not inherent in human nature; it is something learned through conflicts of interests in the society. It is a mechanism to settle interest conflicts in modern political civilization. The long feudal history of China lacks democratic political culture tradition. Hierarchical moral code and paternalism were followed for thousands of years in this vast agriculture-based civilization. Economic development and social interests division since in the reform era have resulted in the increasing awareness of rights and rule of law, a new mechanism that integrates and coordinates the new types of interests in a market economy is urgently needed. People increasingly realize that “the most important is that the interest demand of the majority of the people must be considered first.”¹⁹ The development of democratic politics is an inevitable tendency of societal progress. China’s grassroots democracy has expanded from the countryside to the city, from grassroots society to grassroots government, from without the ruling party to within the ruling party, and from election to management. In this process and through repeated practice, the people have gradually learned about democracy, understood democratic procedures, formed democratic habits, and developed civil society in which rule of law is possible. The development of China’s grassroots democracy is driven by public political participation, at the same time it also promotes the people’s ability to defend their rights and exercise their political power in accordance with the laws.

On the other hand, officials at all levels of either the party or the government also need to seek a consensus, from what have taken place in grassroots democratic development, on the value of democratic politics. Undoubtedly, within both political and academic circles there are voices that cast a suspicious light on democratic politics, question the appropriateness of election democracy in China, and debate what form of democracy fits China the best. Therefore, when Hu Jintao emphasized constructing democracy and rule of law, and a just and fair harmonious society, and when Wen Jiabao asserted that “democracy, rule of law, freedom, human rights, equality, and fraternity are not particular to capitalism, but fruits of human civilization

formed in long history and values commonly pursued by humans”,²⁰ certain media voices and scholars emerged to cast doubt on the “universal values” and equate human rights, democracy, and other values that originated from the west as ideological traps of the western powers.²¹ Wen Jiabao in recent years frequently mentioned the importance and urgency of political system reform and emphasized that without the safeguard provided by political system, the fruits of economic reform will be lost, and modernization will not be realized. He criticized the over-centralization of power without meaningful check, and argued that if this problem is to be solved people must be empowered to criticize and supervise the government, corrupt officials must be punished, and citizens’ rights to vote, to know, to participate, and to supervise must be safeguarded.²² Then, some official media published several articles and emphasized, repeatedly, that the reform of political system must insist on “the correct political direction”, which reflect their cautious attitude toward and fear of the filtration of western political models, and their approval of the current system. These articles especially denied the urgency of political reform and did not see the political reform as lagging behind economic reform.²³

From here, it can be seen that regarding what is democracy, whether democracy needs to be developed, how to develop democracy and what form of democracy should be developed, as well as issues of political system reform, are highly controversial within the government and the society. In confronting these controversies, China’s leaders have continually paid heed to the tenet of Deng Xiaoping (Deng, 1993: 374): “not to argue” (*bu zhenglun* 不争论). “Not to argue” does not mean not to tell the right from the wrong; it is meant to “to avoid disturbances” (*bu zheteng* 不折腾) and to “buy the necessary time to reform”. “Arguing merely complicates things and wastes time. Then we would be able to do nothing.” “Don’t argue, but do with bravery and courage.” China’s decision-makers, from the current practice of grassroots democracy and inner party democracy, have been trying to lay a solid foundation, win wide support and seek more consensus for the gradually developing democratic politics. In a sense, it can be said that huge pressures exerted by the various problems and challenges in the process of modernization are the real driving force of the development of democratic politics, just as China’s reform and open up were forced by a crisis situation.

Notes

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1. Hu Jintao, "Gaoju Zhongguo Tese Shehuizhuyi Weida Qizhi, Wei Quanmian Jianshe Xiaokang Shehui Xin Shengli er Fendou: Zai Zhongguo Gongchandang Dishiqi Ci Quanguo Daibiao Dahui Shang de Baogao 高举中国特色社会主义伟大旗帜，为全面建设小康社会新胜利而奋斗：在中国共产党第十七次全国代表大会上的报告" [Raise high the great flag of Chinese-style socialism and fight for the all-round victory of constructing a well-to-do society – Report at the 17th National Party Congress of Communist Party of China], 15th October, 2007.
 2. "Sea election" refers to the direct nomination of the candidates for village committee members by the electorate of the village. Through a preliminary election, the formal candidate is determined. "One-step method," however, has no candidates, and the members of the village committee are directly voted for by the village electorate. "Team campaign" refers to the process in which villagers first nominate candidates for village committee chief, and these candidates in turn will nominate candidates to other village committee posts, forming a team, both sets of candidates will be subject to two rounds of votes. See Ma, 2008.
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10. See Note 1.
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16. *Ibid.*
17. Wen Jiabao, “Report of Government Work – at the Third Session of the 11th National People’s Congress”, 5th March 2010.
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19. “Jiang Zemin’s Speech at the Celebration of the Eightieth Anniversary of the Communist Party of China”, *Renminwang* 人民网 (The People’s Net), 2nd July 2001.
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