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- [From the Editor](#)
- [Letters](#)
- [Essays](#)
- [In Translation](#)
- [Reviews](#)
- [From the Archives](#)
- [The Gimlet Eye](#)
- [Interviews](#)



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Tales**

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China's Village Voices

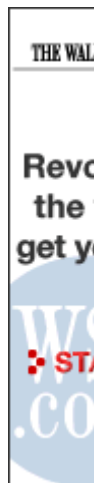
March 2006

By Lynette Ong

The residents of Wenling City, in China's coastal Zhejiang Province, are no strangers to innovation. They like to brag that their city was the cradle of the first private shareholding enterprise in China. More than two decades ago, when the rest of the Chinese workforce was regimented within the vast state-owned sector, Wenling gave birth to a small, privately owned shoe-manufacturing firm. Today the shoe manufacturer still stands and has become an emblem for the city, whose county is now one of the wealthiest and most economically competitive in China.

Now another experiment is being conducted in Wenling, and its precursory importance could prove to be as great as the city's pioneering jump on the economic-reformist bandwagon. Wenling's government has lately been experimenting with grass roots democratic participation in its decision-making processes. The city's successful practice of minzhu kentan, or "democratic open consultations," shows that glasnost (political openness) indeed follows perestroika (economic restructuring).

Back in 1999, the local cadres in Songmen, a township under Wenling's jurisdiction, wanted to introduce an "educational forum on the modernization of agriculture and villages." But the citizens were fed up with the prospect of another lecture from the local government. Confronted with apathy, the local officials decided to hold dialogues with the people on issues that concerned them. Unlike the usual public hearings in China where public participation is only perfunctory, these meetings in Songmen were earnest, lively, and enthusiastically greeted. They were so successful that they attracted the attention of Wenling's propaganda department.



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After sending someone to learn from Songmen's experience, the propaganda department quickly initiated similar dialogue forums in other townships around Wenling. They came in different shapes and forms—they were called “service center for the people” in Linchuan and the “express train to people's lives” in Shitang, for instance—but their purpose was the same: to engage the masses in open dialogue with the cadres in an attempt to solve commonplace problems.

Within Wenling county and Taizhou Prefecture, these open forums proved so popular that county and prefectural Party committees recognized that they had expanded beyond the bounds of “political and ideological work” and had become a novel form of “grass-roots democracy” (jicheng minzhu). With refinement of the rules governing these forums—such as limiting each meeting to the discussion of one topic only, and publicizing background information beforehand to draw public participation—they were transformed into democratic open consultations: “democratic” in that they engaged the masses, and “open” in that participants were free to air their opinions without fear of prosecution. Such an approach was indeed innovative for China, so much so that a Communist Party think tank awarded Wenling a national prize for “Innovation and Excellence in Local Chinese Governance” in 2004.

But what are the boundaries of this consultative arrangement? Is the Party willingly delegating decision-making powers to the masses in Wenling? Is China really loosening up?

The answers to these questions remain unclear. It is clear enough, however, that such official accommodation of grass roots democracy has been limited in scope and impact. To date, the consultations have only been held in townships and villages—the two lowest administrative levels in China. Six years after they were first implemented, there has been no attempt to organize open consultations on even a county-wide level. The higher the administrative level on which a policy is enacted in China, the higher the political stakes in its success or failure, and authorities seem ultracautious about the growth prospects of such a potentially dangerous policy as democratic consultation. This same logic explains why China's much-heralded competitive elections have only so far been held in villages and in some selected townships.

Just as it would be wrong to assume that Wenling's open consultations are fully democratic, it would be likewise wrong to think that they are fully open. On sensitive topics such as cadres'

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salary levels and the ethics of Party rule, a firm line is drawn. When the consultations were growing rapidly in 2004, Wenling's Party committee determined that they would be conducted under the principle of "upholding the Party's leadership," so that no one would assume that honest debate was an invitation to challenge supreme Party authority.

Having said that, Wenling's democratic consultations have inched local governance forward in an unprecedented manner. Local cadres have had open dialogues with the people on a range of topics such as school relocation, village finance, the renovation of old towns, environmental problems caused by a fishery processing plant, and the townships' business environment.

What distinguishes these meetings from the norm is that local officials have to take into account the opinions expressed during the discussions and report final decisions to the participants. If final policy decisions stray too far away from the sentiments expressed during the meetings, the officials will inevitably face public uproar. To a certain extent, this shows that local cadres in Wenling are held accountable to the people.

The most groundbreaking step yet in the progress of Wenling-style democratic open consultations has been their ability to influence local government finances, traditionally one of the murkiest subjects in rural China. Because many local governments are heavily indebted, and because their financing arrangements often involve bribery and corruption, posing fiscal questions to local cadres is audacious, risky and taboo. But the local government in Wenling has included township financial budgeting within the purview of its townships' local people's congress meetings.

In July 2005, in preparation for the annual meeting of the local people's congress in Xinhe township (a township under Wenling's jurisdiction), congress representatives were given a generalized, two-page "draft report on the financial budget for 2005." Not knowing the ins and outs of township finance, the representatives demanded a detailed explanation of each item. The township finance bureau obliged by producing a detailed draft report of the budget for the meeting, which outlined the township's expenditures on such items as construction expenses of old towns and business districts, utility and daily expenses, and travel allowances for local officials.

A total of 190 people attended the meeting, but only 90 were representatives of the people's congress; the rest were ordinary

residents. During the meeting, one of the congress representatives questioned the proposed expenditure of 700,000 yuan on “car purchases.” Another pointed out that spending only 200,000 yuan on a drinking water project when more than two-thirds of the township did not have access to clean tap water was clearly imprudent. After overnight deliberation, the local township cadres reassembled with the congress representatives and answered their concerns. Xinhe government had decided to reduce expenditure on “car purchases” to 500,000 yuan, while investing the difference on the drinking water project. The democratic open consultation in Xinhe also gave rise to a permanent budget supervision committee in the local people’s congress to conduct supervision on financial budgets on an ongoing basis.

This candidness about local finance is not easily spotted in other places. Across rural China, local governments are facing immense debt, the magnitude and causes of which are everyone’s guesses because of the lack of transparency. Getting the cadres to open their books and to speak frankly on the size of debt and how they intend to deal with it, is a welcome step toward improving the financial quagmire in local China.

What Xinhe’s experience represents is the incorporation of democratic open consultations into “the system” for the first time. So far the consultations have been budding outside the formal structure of the governing apparatus. “By introducing democratic consultations to the financial budgeting process, our intention is to stimulate the invigilating function of the local people’s congress,” said Chen Yimin, an official from Wenling’s propaganda department who has been promoting this system as fervently as a scientist with a pet project. Nonetheless, this begs the question of why the local people’s congresses, which are originally intended to serve a popular watchdog role, are not reformed themselves. The Party might not be ready to take such a step, but this is a good start.

In April 2005, Zeguo, another township under Wenling’s jurisdiction, held a democratic open consultation on how to spend its 40 million yuan public-works project. Unlike other meetings, this consultation adopted the “deliberative polling” technique. Deliberative polling involves selecting a group of people randomly from the population, in this case 275 residents from Zeguo township, to participate in subgroups that deliberated on the merits and demerits of each of the 30 short-listed public-works projects. The participants were asked to choose their favorite projects. Twelve were ultimately selected. The list was then passed to the

township people's congress for ratification.

Deliberative polling is also considered to be more “scientific” than conventional polling because while the results of the latter are easily swayed by media headlines, participants in the former take time to deliberate.

Scientific as this system may sound, there is much skepticism concerning its implementation in developing China. “I would be very cautious about making any claims for the future of deliberative polling—it is an intensive and costly exercise,” said Sarah Cook, a Beijing-based Ford Foundation program officer. Indeed, the experiment in Zeguo costs 100,000 yuan—not a sum that all townships in rural China can spare. Nonetheless, Ms. Cook said that experimenting with different forms of accountability mechanisms will enable China to find its own innovative ways of making the current system of public hearings more representative. Regardless of how its officials choose to conduct them, there is no question that such open democratic consultations have raised political consciousness in Wenling.

Since Hu Jintao's government is well aware that uncurbed corruption can destroy Party legitimacy and weaken the state, this grass roots political reform aligns the interests of the central government with the people. In the absence of institutionalized democracy that installs checks and balances on local officials' behavior, these forums provide a powerful arena for the people to take over the role of invigilators.

Ms. Ong is a doctoral candidate at the Australian National University. She specializes in Chinese politics and the nexus between credit and politics in China.

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