

## **Feedback Without Pushback? Innovations in Local Governance**

Statement to the Congressional-Executive Commission on China  
Roundtable on “Political Change in China? Public Participation  
and Local Governance Reforms”

Washington, D.C.

May 15, 2006

by

**Joseph Fewsmith**

**Boston University**

Over the last several years, China has begun to introduce a number of reforms into local governance in an effort to allay local discontent, to respond to growing demands for greater participation in politics, and to better monitor local agents of the state. Although limited elections have been introduced into the Chinese Communist Party, the main thrust of these reforms seems to be gain the sort of input that elections normally provide but without introducing electoral democracy, or, to use Rick Baum’s felicitous phrase, to get “feedback without pushback.”<sup>[i]</sup> The purpose of this short paper is to discuss some of the innovations that have been introduced in recent years in local governance and give some preliminary evaluation of their effectiveness, recognizing both that such reforms are still in their early stages and that my own research is on-going.

In general terms, the sorts of reforms the CCP has been introducing fall into two broad categories, those that adjust the party’s relations with society and those that introduce limited competition and supervision into the party itself. As will be pointed out below, there is some overlap between these two categories, but conceptually, and to a large extent in practice, they seem to be separate at the moment. Both respond to emerging societal pressures, and both aim at such goals as better governance and greater supervision. Neither aims to do away with the party; rather the intent is to improve party responsiveness both to reduce societal discontent (“pushback”) and to preserve the party’s ruling position.<sup>[ii]</sup> To the extent that such adjustments are effective, both hardline Marxists who resist such innovations and those who hope for a rapid transition to democracy are likely to be disappointed. It might be added that if such reforms are ineffective, the alternatives might be even worse.

### Adjusting Relations Between the Party/State and Society

Chinese society has changed dramatically over the past two and a half decades; society is far more dynamic, wealthier (though unequally so), better educated, more independent of the party/state, and pluralistic. Such trends, as many accounts attest, have generated demands for public participation in governance. Some of these demands are broadly spread across the body politic, while others are limited to specific sectors, such as the business community. As is well known, much of China’s economic development in recent years has depended on the growth of a vigorous private economy, and government, especially at the local level, has to take the needs of this sector into account when thinking about public policy.

Chambers of Commerce. One way to do so is to allow, or even encourage, the development of NGOs. Much attention has been paid of late, in both China and elsewhere, to the role of NGOs in the various “color” revolutions that have brought down governments in the Ukraine, Georgia, and elsewhere. But while NGOs can bring demands for political change, they are also a necessary part of the evolving state-society relationship in China. From the perspective of the government, NGOs can provide essential information that can promote better public policy. Also, if part of the objective of government reform is to “change the function” of government departments so that they provide more service and less control, then NGOs can pick up some of the slack, providing societal networks that can organize and coordinate societal activities as the state takes up a narrower range of activities.

One area in which one can see visible change taking place – at least in some places -- is in the emergence of chambers of commerce (*shanghui*) and trade associations (*hangye xiehui*). In much of China, chambers of commerce still have a very strong government imprint. After studying Yantai, the fourth largest city in Shandong province, Kenneth Foster concluded that business associations there are “highly integrated into the bureaucracy, while at the same time being relatively ineffective organizations.”<sup>[iii]</sup> This statement is probably applicable to much of the north China plain. The problem is two-fold. First, in many places, as government departments were reorganized into associations overseeing privatized industry, the officials running those associations tended to be the same officials who had previously overseen the industry. Hierarchical patterns of authority have tended to continue. Second, many government departments are simply unwilling to turn their functions over to business associations for fear of diminishing their own importance.

This pattern sometimes leads to strange results. For instance, in Tianjin, the northern port city near Beijing, the Tianjin Apparel Chamber of Commerce (*Tianjin fuzhuang shanghui*) was established in 1998 as a second tier organization (*erji zuzhi*) under the Tianjin Chamber of Commerce (which, as in other places, is the Association of Industry and Commerce [*gongshanglian*], the united front organization initially established in 1953 and later revived in the reform era). It has a chairman, 12 vice chairmen, and four employees. But it does not have independent legal standing. In Tianjin, there are few, if any, state-owned enterprises (SOEs) left in the apparel industry, so the Apparel Chamber of Commerce is really the only association that can represent the apparel industry in the city. The problem is that there is a pre-existing Tianjin Textile and Apparel Association (*Tianjin fangzhi fuzhuang xiehui*) that was set up out of the government bureau that originally oversaw the industry. So this association is a semi-official organization, much like the business associations in Yantai that Kenneth Foster describes. Because it is semi-official and not very effective, enterprises tend not to trust it. But under the rule that there can be only one association per industry, the more effective Apparel Chamber of Commerce cannot be registered. Fundamentally, the local Civil Affairs Bureau does not want to offend the Textile and Apparel Association, so the more effective, bottom up organization is left largely crippled and in legal limbo.<sup>[iv]</sup>

Ironically, there is a Wenzhou Chamber of Commerce in Tianjin that has had fewer problems getting established and promoting the interests of its members than the Tianjin Apparel Chamber of Commerce. The Wenzhou Chamber of Commerce represents all the diverse interests of its members, so it (like its corresponding chambers of commerce in other cities of China) has not been forced to adhere to a “one association, one industry” rule. It is attached to the Wenzhou Office in Tianjin (*Wenzhou shi zhu jin banshichu*) and supervised by the Tianjin Office of Economic Cooperation (*Tianjin shi jingji xiezuo bangongshi*), so it has independent legal standing – the only non-official chamber of commerce approved by the Tianjin Civil Affairs Bureau. This suggests some loosening in the rules governing business associations in Tianjin, but it is likely to be a long time before there is major change.<sup>[v]</sup>

In Wenzhou itself, however, business associations play a considerably larger role. Wenzhou, in southern Zhejiang province, has become famous for its promotion of private enterprise – and for its rapid economic development. But in the 1980s, as Wenzhou merchants began selling goods throughout China, they developed a reputation for turning out shoddy and counterfeit goods, undercutting not only other Chinese producers but also their fellow Wenzhou-ese. In 1987 both the city and its business community were shocked when angry residents of Hangzhou, the provincial capital, burned some 5,000 shoes in protest of their poor quality.

It was precisely this incident that stimulated the formation of chambers of commerce in Wenzhou. The first chamber was the Lucheng District Shoe and Leather Industry Association (*Lucheng xiege hangye xiehui*), established in 1988 (and later renamed the Wenzhou Shoe and Leather Industry Association). The organizers of this association, despite the extensive history of business associations in Wenzhou, had little knowledge of previous business groups and less knowledge of how to proceed in contemporary China. They went to the Association of Industry and Commerce. A meeting of the Central Secretariat in December 1987 had decided

that the Association of Industry and Commerce would be renamed chambers of commerce (or general chambers of commerce) for external purposes (the Association of Industry and Commerce continued to exist as United Front organs under party and government control). This action recognized the importance of the Association of Industry and Commerce in guiding the development of private enterprise. In the case of Wenzhou, it was the Association of Industry and Commerce that harbored both the historical consciousness and the knowledge of the contemporary period, and thus it was the Association of Industry and Commerce that helped set up this first business association in 1988.

The new association cooperated closely with government to address the problems confronting the industry. The government, in collaboration with the association, drew up the “Management Regulations on the Rectification Quality of the Lucheng District Shoe and Leather Industry” and the “Provisional Regulations on After Sales Service of the Shoe and Leather Industry.” Such measures, enforced through the association, gave new life to the industry.[\[vi\]](#)

Other associations began to organize, but this progress was soon interrupted by Tiananmen and the political uncertainty that followed. When Deng Xiaoping made his “southern tour” in 1992, organizational activity in Wenzhou took off again. By August 2002 there were 104 such non-governmental business associations at the city level. In addition, there were another 321 associations at the county, county-level municipality, and district levels, with some 42,624 members covering most of Wenzhou’s industrial enterprises.

Some of these associations were, like those in Tianjin and Yantai, clearly affiliated with if not integrated into government. But others—including the Lighting Chamber of Commerce, the Shoe and Leather Industry Chamber of Commerce, and the Apparel Chamber of Commerce—were initiated by the enterprises themselves. They grew up “outside the system” (*tizhiwai*), though they quickly developed good relations with the Association of Industry and Commerce. Unlike the associations in Yantai, where the government is responsible for most of the funding, most if not all associations in Wenzhou are self-funded. For instance, the Wenzhou Apparel Industry Chamber of Commerce (*Wenzhou fuzhuang shanghui*), perhaps the largest and most successful of the various industry associations in Wenzhou, began with only 10 enterprises in the early stages. The lead was taken by Liu Songfu, head of Golden Triangle Enterprise (*Jin sanjiao gongchang*). Although the Association of Industry and Commerce supported the establishment of the association, it provided no funds; the entire cost of running the association over the first years—some 100,000 *yuan*—was borne by Liu and a small number of other leaders.[\[vii\]](#)

In the early years, the Apparel Chamber of Commerce, like other business associations, maintained very close relationships with political leaders. The deputy head of the Alliance of Industry and Commerce, Wu Ziqin, chaired the first congress of the chamber of commerce, and a number of political leaders were named either honorary board members or senior advisors. The support of the Alliance of Industry and Commerce, which became the sponsoring unit (*guakao danwei*) of the new chamber of commerce, was necessary for the chamber’s registration, its ability to secure office space, and ability to convince other enterprises to join. The authority of the Alliance also supported the chamber’s efforts to enhance quality control.

Over time, however, relations between trade associations and government have become more (but not completely) institutionalized. Personal relations between association leaders and government leaders remain close, but there has been a tendency for government officials to be less involved in the internal affairs of trade associations. Although the government still appoints a few trade association heads, 77% report that they freely elect their chairmen in accordance with their own rules of operation.[\[viii\]](#) Moreover, the internal organization of trade associations—how many directors they have, how many committees they set up, and whether to organize training and consulting activities to raise funds for the association—seems to be free of government interference. Indeed, the fact that Wenzhou’s trade associations receive no government funding makes them quite entrepreneurial. In addition to imposing membership dues, trade associations organize training classes to impart technical expertise and provide consulting services to raise funds. They also

organize trade group trips abroad so members can learn about industry trends and relay the latest information and technical standards to colleagues back home.

The changing relationship between industry associations and the government may be symbolized by the Apparel Industry Chamber of Commerce. The chamber amended its charter in 2003 to specify that government officials should not be named as advisors.

The reorganized Advisory Commission was composed of five prestigious entrepreneurs who had previously served as vice chairmen of the chamber.[\[ix\]](#) This change was not an assertion of chamber independence from government supervision so much as a reflection of the government's growing trust that this NGO could run its own affairs without running afoul of government concerns. Elections for leadership roles in chambers are becoming more competitive. The Apparel Industry Chamber of Commerce was the first to introduce *cha'e* elections (in which the number of candidates exceed the number of positions), and others have emulated the practice. Some have borrowed the practice of "sea elections" (*hai xuan*) from village elections, allowing nominations for association head to be nominated freely by members. In 2000, Liu Songfu, who spearheaded the establishment of the Apparel Industry Chamber of Commerce, was defeated by Chen Min, the leader of a new generation of entrepreneurs who have expanded the scope of chamber activities as well as its membership.

Wenzhou's business associations even have a degree of influence over government policy. For instance, the regulations governing Wenzhou's shoe and leather industry, mentioned above, were a collaborative effort between the government and industry representatives. Similarly, the "10th Five-Year Development Plan of the Wenzhou Apparel Industry" was worked out by the Wenzhou Apparel Chamber of Commerce in coordination with the city's Economic Commission. During sessions of the local people's congress and Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), Wenzhou's chambers of commerce recommended 141 entrepreneurs to join those two bodies and raised 54 proposals. The General Chamber of Commerce (Association of Industry and Commerce) also organized members of the CPPCC to draft a proposal to create an industrial park.[\[x\]](#) Trade associations have clearly given Wenzhou entrepreneurs a voice that they would not have had individually. Nevertheless, studies indicate that the influence of trade associations remains limited.[\[xi\]](#)

Although government officials have withdrawn, at least to some extent, from participation in trade associations, entrepreneurs are increasingly participating in politics, particularly in the people's congresses and Chinese People's Political Consultative Congresses (CPPCCs) at various levels. By 2003, a total of 421 members of 64 chambers of commerce participated in People's Congresses or CPPCCs, including 3 in the National People's Congress and 13 in the provincial people's congress.[\[xii\]](#)

Deliberative Democracy. North of Wenzhou, in the county-level city of Wenling, subordinate to the prefectural-level city of Taizhou, a system of "deliberative democracy" (*xieshang minzhu*) has been developing. This system of democratic consultative meetings (*minzhu kentan hui*) began in June 1996 when one of the townships under Wenling's jurisdiction, Songmen, held a meeting as part of a campaign to carry out "education on the modernization of agriculture and villages." The people expressed no interest in yet another "you talk, we listen" campaign. Confronted with this apathy and resentment, local leaders decided to try something different. Instead of having the cadres on the stage speaking to peasants assembled below, they invited the peasants to take the stage and express their opinions. The meeting apparently became very lively and there was a direct interchange of views between the "masses" and the cadres.[\[xiii\]](#)

As in most areas of China, there were a variety of tensions and problems that this new form of "political and ideological work" (which is what this forum started out as) addressed. There were tensions between the townships and the villages, between the cadres and the people, between the party committee and the government at the village level, and among cadres. What the leadership in Songmen township sensed very

quickly was that by involving the people in discussions of public issues, different cadres and different interests were forced to communicate and compromise with each other. Moreover, real misunderstandings as well as a number of real but minor issues that affected relations between the people and the local leadership could be cleared up quickly and on the spot.

For such political innovation to occur in China there must be both social circumstances conducive to change and political entrepreneurship. In the case of Wenling, the population was quite prosperous: in the urban areas per capita income is 12,651 *yuan* per year; in the rural areas, 6,229 *yuan*.<sup>[xiv]</sup> Moreover, it is a population with quite a lot of physical mobility; of the 1.16 million residents in Wenling, some 200,000 are away from the city on a long-term basis. Such people, and those who travel for shorter lengths of time, bring back a greater democratic consciousness. The rapid development of Wenling's economy and the exercise of village autonomy in recent years had similarly stimulated the growth of democratic consciousness. Such developments stood in contrast with the non-democratic ways of making decisions, increasing tensions with the local cadres and making decisions difficult to implement.

Democratic consultations operate somewhat differently at the village and township levels. At the village level, in 1998 peasant representative congresses (*nongmin daibiao dahui*) began to be formed. Each production team (*xiaozu*) would select one or more representatives, depending on the size of the production team, and members of the village party committee and the village committee (the government side of village administration) are de facto members. In 1999, this system took on the name of "village assembly" (*cunmin yishihui*). This system has now spread throughout Wenling; of the villages under Songmen township, most convene an average of two assembly meetings per month. This system is regarded as an extension of the democratic consultation system.<sup>[xv]</sup>

Many of these meetings revolve around public finance, one of the most contentious issues in rural China. In one village under Ruohuang township, these assemblies took on a much greater importance after the village head, who had been elected, used over 1 million *yuan* of public funds to gamble, which caused a strong reaction among the peasants. Previously they had trusted someone they had freely elected to manage finances honestly, but after this incident they did not trust anyone and insisted that matters of public finance be handled openly by the village assemblies. In addition to public finances, there are many issues that directly affect the interests of villagers in an area like Ruohuang township: urbanization brings issues of land requisitions, paving roads, environmental preservation, and so forth, all of which are taken up by the village assemblies.<sup>[xvi]</sup>

At the township level, democratic consultations are really a system of open hearings on public policy. When the democratic consultation system began, discussions flowed from topic to topic, making resolution of any issue more difficult. After a while, it was decided that each democratic consultation should focus on a single issue. The topic for discussion is usually decided by the township party committee or government, though there are provisions that allow the public to petition to hold a meeting on a particular topic. The topic, time, and place of meeting are posted, and anyone is allowed to come, but no one (other than the leadership) is obliged to come. Democratic consultation meetings are generally held once a quarter.

At least some democratic consultations do have an impact on public policy and implementation at the township level. For instance, a democratic consultation meeting was held in Wenqiao township in July 2002 to discuss the leadership's plan to merge two school districts. The leadership believed that the merger would save funds and strengthen the academic level of the remaining school. But such a merger would affect residents in the district of the school being closed because it would increase transportation costs and living expenses for those who stayed in dormitories. Feelings ran very high. In the end, the leadership decided not to merge the two schools right away, but rather allow parents to choose which school to send their children to. Before long, the students enrolled in the weaker school began transferring to the better school, and the decision was effected without public outcry.<sup>[xvii]</sup>

Similarly, a meeting was held in Songmen township in January 2004 to discuss the creation of a specialized market for products used in the fishing industry. Vendors of these products were scattered and often crowded into the streets, causing traffic problems. Residents were asked to discuss such issues as whether to build such a market, where it should be built, and who should invest in it. Several hundred people attended the meeting, and the final decision incorporated public references for the location of the district and the way in which investment would be handled.[\[xviii\]](#)

### Inner-Party Democracy

Efforts to broaden participation within the party and to increase competition within the party go under the rubric “inner-party democracy” (*dangnei minzhu*), although the wider public is sometimes involved. The two main types of inner-party democracy that have been pursued are the party delegate “permanent representative system” (*changrenzhi*) and the “public promotion, public election system” (*gongtui gongxuan*). The former is being vigorously, if unevenly, promoted in many places; the latter largely restricted to the provinces of Sichuan and Jiangsu. Data on both are sketchy, but the outlines are clear.

*Changrenzhi*. The Central Organization Department, following up on the call for political reform contained in the 13<sup>th</sup> Party Congress report, authorized 11 municipalities, counties, and districts in five provinces to experiment with something called the “party congress permanent representation system” (*dang de daibiao dahui changrenzhi*). Although Mao Zedong had originally called for this change in 1956, it had never been implemented in a systematic way. The basic idea is that under “democratic centralism” the highest power in the party (at all levels) is supposed to flow from the party congresses, generally held once every five years. Those congresses select party committees (the Central Committee in the case of the national party congress), which then selects a standing committee. In theory, the party secretary and standing committee are subordinate to the party congress and the delegates that make it up, but in fact the delegates to party congresses have no power derived from their positions. Many delegates are leading cadres at different levels, whose power and influence derives from the positions they hold, not their roles as delegates to the party congress. Other delegates are chosen for their loyalty and service; being named a delegate is an honor, not a position of power. Delegates are generally uninformed as to the content of the party congress or who they are to vote for until just before the congress meets. As the saying put it, delegates “The party committee decides personnel selections, and party members draw their circles” (*dangwei ding renxuan, dangyuan hua chuan*). Their function as party representatives ends as soon as the party congress ends. When another party congress is held five years later, another group of representatives will be named. Power is thus centralized and top down, contrary to the provisions in the party constitution.

Obviously the CCP has lived with this system for many years, but two concerns have led people to want to elevate the status of the party representatives and congresses. One is the power concentrated in the hands of the party secretary and standing committee has led to corruption and other abuses of power that have feed social protests and a general decline in the legitimacy of the party in recent years. The other is that even members of the party feel little benefit from their party membership, as they are excluded from information and participation, much as the general public is. In other words, there is a problem of the party leadership not only being alienated from the general public but also from the great bulk of the party membership. If the “governing capacity” of the party is to be improved (as party documents call for), then the party as a whole needs to be more functional and the party’s legitimacy, both in the eyes of the party membership and the general public, needs to be raised.

The *changrenzhi* attempts to address this issue first by having party representatives elected by members of the party (this has to be qualified by saying that this part of the *changrenzhi* is far from being universally implemented, though it has been in some places) and by having the representatives serve five-year terms, meeting in annual sessions. At such annual meetings, the relevant party committees are supposed to submit work reports for the review and approval of the party representatives. This is intended to increase the

supervision over the work of the party secretary and standing committee. The scope of the authority of the party representatives is one of the issues currently being debated within the party.

Jiaojiang district in Taizhou municipality in southern Zhejiang province was one of the places that began implementing the *changrenzhi* on an experimental basis in 1988. In this case, representatives are divided into “representative groups” (*daibiaotuan*) based on locality or functional group. Each representative group has a head and a deputy head. The function of the groups is to organize discussion, think about personnel selection, and to propose resolutions. The leadership of the representative groups links the representatives to the party leadership. In the case of Jiaojiang, the district established a permanent organ, called the Work Office of the Party Congress Permanent Representatives, to maintain contact between the leadership of the representative groups and the ordinary representatives. The office publishes a bulletin periodically (about once a month). There is now an annual meeting of the party representatives that listens to work reports by the local party leadership and discipline inspection committee.[\[xix\]](#)

As party representatives become more important, their selection must be considered more carefully. In the case of Jiaojiang district, the number of representatives was cut by a third, from 300 to 200, and the number of electing units has been increased so that representatives are better known to their “constituents.” Efforts have been made to increase the number of nominations compared to representatives selected. This has generated better-educated representatives, according to statistics from Taizhou (the *changrenzhi* experiment was recently extended throughout Taizhou).[\[xx\]](#)

Perhaps one of the most important issues raised by the permanent representative system is the relationship between “leading cadres” and representatives. Leading cadres at a given level normally make up a large percentage of the representatives selected to attend a party congress, often around 70 percent. Recommendations call for keeping this number down to around 60 percent. So one impact of the permanent representative system appears to be an expansion of the number of people able to participate in party affairs—but not by a large margin.

Ya’an city, Sichuan province, began experimenting with the *changrenzhi* in the winter of 2002-2003, when end-of-term elections for local cadres were coming up and when the Sixteenth Party Congress had just endorsed expansion of the *changrenzhi*. Ya’an city selected two places, Rongjing County and Yucheng District, to try out the new system. The major breakthrough made in these experiments was making all candidates for party representative to face election by all party members in the area. In the case of Yucheng district, 12 percent of all party members were nominated, and in Rongjing County, 13 percent were nominated. These “primary candidates” were then reduced to “formal candidates” through a process of screening (candidates must meet certain age and work requirements) and voting. By local regulation, there had to be at least 20% more candidates than positions for the final elections. Each candidate gave a three-minute speech, and voting was by secret ballot. Six leading cadres were not elected as party representatives. According to local regulations, when a leading cadre loses an election, he or she can still attend the party congress as a “special delegate” (a way of saving face?), but six months after the election the party Organization Department organizes a poll of party members in that cadre’s district. If the cadre cannot get the backing of two-thirds of local party members, then he or she is removed from office. This is precisely what happened to the party secretary of one village.[\[xxi\]](#)

Public Recommendation and Public Election.[\[xxii\]](#) Sichuan began experimenting with the *gongtui gongxuan* (public recommendation and public election) system in 1995. It was an obvious outgrowth of the social tensions in that relatively poor inland province. In 1993, Renshou county experienced what was until then perhaps the largest outburst of mass protest and rioting. Economic growth was not a viable path to social stability, at least in the short run, so the province began experimenting with political reform. The *gongtui gongxuan* system started in 1995 in Nanbu County. At the time, there were about 20-30 cases. In 1998, the well-known Buyun election took place under Suining City. Despite the issuing of a ruling that said that the

Buyun election was unconstitutional, the *gongtui gongxuan* system continued to spread in Sichuan (though it did not, like the Buyun election, extend to all the voters). In the 2001-2002 term elections, there were about 2,000 cases. That is about 40% of Sichuan's counties. It should also be noted that the system was more readily adopted in economically backward places where social tensions were high and the political leadership had no chance of competing on the basis of economic growth.

The basic pattern of the *gongtui gongxuan* system was to enlarge the number of people participating in the selection of township heads and deputy heads. In the past, such decisions were made by the standing committee of the county. But under the *gongtui gongxuan system*, the number of voters was expanded to include:

- \*All staff of the township (about 80-120 people),
- \*The top three cadres from each village under the township (so if there are 1 villages, that would be 30 people),
- \*The heads of the small groups (*xiaozu*) in villages (usually 5 per village, so about 50 people, and
- \*Delegates to the township people's congress (perhaps 30-50 people).

In addition, the county sends 5-20 delegates. In the past, these were super delegates with 40-60% of the vote. But in some places now, they are beginning to implement a "one person, one vote" rule.

So, in total, some 200-300 people participate in the selection process. This is still a very limited electorate, but nevertheless a considerable expansion from the half dozen county officials who used to make these decisions. It also has to be noted that in some elections, the system has been extended to include the party secretary and the electorate has been expanded to include the whole population. It is not clear how many townships have undertaken such extensive reforms, but they still make up a small minority.

### Implications

The discussion above is intended to be illustrative rather than an exhaustive cataloguing of the changes that are being experimented with at the local level in China. There are other systems that have been used: the "two ballot system" in Shanxi, the "one mechanism, three transformations" in Hebei, and the growing role of owners' associations in some parts of the country, to name a few. The role of local people's congresses also seems to be growing. These changes do not, or do not yet, amount to a fundamental change, much less a democratization of local governance in China, and, looking at the country as a whole, these innovations appear to be spotty and uneven. But they do reflect the pressures that are being felt – sometimes by local officials themselves, and sometimes by central authorities who want to better monitor local agents – to change local governance, including the role of the party at the local level. One way of thinking about these changes is to note that they mark a preliminary effort to try to integrate the horizontal linkages found in local society with the hierarchical nature of the party. That seems an impossible task in the long run, but there are clearly pressures to change the way the political hierarchy interacts with local society.

Another way of looking at these changes is that they mark efforts to move "political reform" up the hierarchy in ways that do not require elections (at least elections that are open to the general public) at levels higher than that of the village. Thus, democratic consultation meetings take place at the township level, as do *gongtui gongxuan* elections and the *changrenzhi*. Business associations in Wenzhou influence policy at the county and city levels.

It can be debated whether these reforms are steps on the way to democracy or whether they are ways of putting off democracy, perhaps indefinitely. China seems to be striving for ways to implement a system that simultaneously provides the state with feedback on the performance of its local agents, checks the power of those local agents, expands participation in local governance, and generates better governance – all without Western style democracy.

It should be noted that these reforms are in their infancy and there seems to be at present little “spill over” from one area of reform to another or from one location to another. For instance, most observers think that “civil society” is more developed in Wenzhou than in Wenling, but it is Wenling that has adopted the more interesting political reforms. This seems to be, in part, a reflection of the levels they are at in the political system. Wenling is a county-level city of 1.6 million under the jurisdiction of Taizhou municipality; Wenzhou is a city of over 5 million that is directly administered by the province. Obviously political reform efforts in such a major city (and one already known for its “Wenzhou model”) would have ramifications that reforms in Wenling do not. This distinction only underscores the fact that even as localities pursue reforms of various sorts, the choice of what area pursues what type of reform is a very political decision, not simply a reflection of social pressures from below.

What seems to be clear, however, is that these reforms have been growing in number and depth over the course of the last decade, and they can be expected to continue as local society continues to develop and as China continues to face social tensions.

## ENDNOTES

[i] Richard Baum used this phrase in making comments at the Association for Asian Studies meeting in San Francisco, April 7, 2006. I borrow his phrase with permission.

[ii] Several parts of this statement draw heavily on my articles “Taizhou Area Explores Ways to Improve Local Governance” and “Chambers of Commerce in Wenzhou and the Potential, Limits of ‘Civil Society’ in China” in *China Leadership Monitor*, issues 15 and 16, summer 2005 and fall 2005, respectively, available at [www.chinaleadershipmonitor.org](http://www.chinaleadershipmonitor.org).

[iii] Kenneth W. Foster, “Embedded within State Agencies: Business Associations in Yantai,” in *The China Journal*, no. 47 (January 2002), p. 65.

[iv] Gao Xinjun, “Woguo hangye shanghui de falu huanjing yanjiu – dui Tianjin shanghui de diaocha” (The legal environment of China’s business associations – an investigation of Tianjin’s chambers of commerce), paper presented at the Conference on Improving the Governance of Non-Official Chambers of Commerce, Wuxi, August 19-21, 2005.

[v] Ibid.

[vi] Chen Shengyong, Wang Jinjun, and Ma Bin, *Zuzhijhua, zizhu zhili yu minzhu* (Organized, self governance and democracy) (Beijing: *Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe*, 2004), p. 38.

[vii] Chen Shengyong, Wang Jinjun, and Ma Bin, *Zuzhijhua, zizhu zhili yu minzhu* (Organized, self governance and democracy) (Beijing: *Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe*, 2004), p. 285.

[viii] Yu Jianxing, Huang Honghua, and Fang Liming, *Zai zhengfu yu qiye zhi jian–yi Wenzhou shanghui wei yanjiu duixiang* (Between government and enterprise–looking at Wenzhou’s chambers of commerce) (Hangzhou: *Zhejiang renmin chubanshe*, 2004), p. 286.

[ix] Chen Shenggyong, et. al., *Zuzhijhua, zizhu zhili yu minzhu*, p. 294.

[x] Yu Jianxing et. al., *Zai zhengfu yu qiye zhi jian*, p. 80.

[xi] Chen Shenggyong, et. al., *Zuzhijhua, zizhu zhili yu minzhu*, p. 263.

[xii] Chen Shenggyong, et. al., *Zuzhijhua, zizhu zhili yu minzhu*, pp. 229-230.

[xiii] Jia Xijin and Zhang Yun, “Zhongguo canyushi minzhu de xin fazhan” (A new development in China’s participatory democracy), in Mu Yifei and Chen Yimin, eds., *Minzhu kentan: Wenlingren de chuangzao* (Democratic consultation: A creation of the people of Wenling) (Beijing: Central Compilation and Translation Press, 2005), pp. 80–93.

[xiv] Dong Xuebing and Shi Jinchuan, “Zhidu, boyi yu quanli chonggou” (System, game, and the restructuring of power), in Mu Yifei and Chen Yimi, ed., *Minzhu kentan*, p. 107.

[xv] Xiao Qing, “Wenling cunyihui: Nituli dansheng Zhongguo xin xingtai minzhu zhengzhi” (Wenling’s village assemblies: A new form of democratic politics born from China’s soil), in Mu Yifei and Chen Yimin, eds., *Minzhu kentan*, pp. 179–180.

[xvi] Wang Junbo, “Qiaoran bianhua de ‘xiangcun zhengzhi’” (The silent change of ‘village politics’), in Mu Yifei and Chen Yimin, eds., *Minzhu kentan*, p. 193.

[xvii] Jia and Zhang, “Zhongguo canyushi minzhu de xin fazhan,” p. 82.

[xviii] Wang Junbo, “‘Caogen minzhu’: zai zhiduhua de yangguangxia” (‘Grassroots democracy’: Under the light of institutionalization), in Mu Yifei and Chen Yimin, eds., *Minzhu kentan*, p. 190. [xix] “Jianli he wanshan xian (shi, qu) dang de daibiaohui changrenzhi gongzuo de diaocha yu sikao” (An investigation and thoughts on establishing and perfecting the party congress permanent representation system in counties (municipalities and districts), in *Xin shiqi dang jianshe gongzuo redian nandian wenti diaocha baogao* (A survey report on hot topics and difficult questions in party building work in the new period), pp. 232–235.

[xx] Ibid., pp. 237–239.

[xxi] Xiang Guolan, “Tuijin dangnei minzhu de zhidu cuangxin – Ya’an dang daibiao dahui changrenzhi anli fenxi” (institutional innovation in the promotion of inner-party democracy – An analysis of the case of Ya’an’s party representative congress permanent representative system), in Yu Keping, ed., *Zhongguo difang zhengfu chuangxin – Anli yanjiu baogao (2003-2004)* (Innovations in China’s local governmental system – Case study reports, 2003-2004), pp. 175-199.

[xxii] This section is based on Lai Hairong, “Jingzhengxing xuanju zai Sichuan sheng xiangzhen yi ji de fazhan” (The development of competitive elections in Sichuan at the township level), in He Zengke et. al., eds., *Jiceng minzhu he defang zhili chuangxin*, pp. 51-108.