REGIME INCLUSION AND THE RESILIENCE OF AUTHORITARIANISM: THE LOCAL PEOPLE'S POLITICAL CONSULTATIVE CONFERENCE IN POST-MAO CHINESE POLITICS

YAN Xiaojun[*]

Conventional wisdom holds that authoritarian regimes are inherently fragile, due to their lack of political legitimacy and excessive reliance on state coercion. The recent unrest in Tunisia and Egypt seems to confirm such a view. However, the past decade has witnessed the stubborn persistence of authoritarian rule in a rapidly rising China. While political rebellions have challenged dictators from Central Asia to North Africa, the Communist regime in China has not only survived the political, economic and ideological crises of the 1990s but has thrived, to an extent that some outside observers began to perceive its method of operating as a fledgling "consensus" that might one day threaten the appeal of the dominant Western model of market capitalism with electoral democracy.[1]

Scholars who examine the persistence of regimes like China's argue that political institutions are "essential for understanding authoritarian politics".[2] Beatriz Magaloni suggests that political institutions "shape bargaining between the dictator and his ruling coalition" and serve as "the instruments through which dictators spy, co-opt, or repress opponents".[3] Under Communist systems, many of these functions are undertaken by a specific kind of political institution, which I refer to in this article as inclusive regime institutions. Kenneth Jowitt defines regime inclusion as "attempts by the party élites to expand the internal boundaries of the regime's

[*] For invaluable comments and suggestions, I am indebted to Elizabeth J. Perry, John P. Burns, the editors of *The China Journal* and two anonymous reviewers. Special thanks go to Yu Jianrong for arranging both the archival research and the supplementary interviews in Z County. Generous funding support provided by the University of Hong Kong is gratefully acknowledged (Small Project Funding #200907176172).

1 Stefan Halper, *The Beijing Consensus: How China's Authoritarian Model Will Dominate the 21st Century* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

2 Beatriz Magaloni, "Credible Power-Sharing and the Longevity of Authoritarian Rule", *Comparative Political Study*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (January 2008), p. 718.

3 *Ibid*.

political, productive, and decision-making systems, to integrate itself with the non-official ... sectors of society rather than insulate itself from them".[4] Stephen White argues that inclusive regime institutions are vital for soviet regimes because they "absorb and process demands, expand the consultative capacities of their systems, give a stake in the system to various sections of their populations, and perhaps preempt demands for more far-reaching and anti-systemic change".[5]

The inclusive regime institutions of the People's Republic of China (PRC) have remained remarkably under-explored, leaving us with an inadequate understanding of the Chinese Party-state and the reasons for its persistence. This article, which draws on a rich collection of internal working documents collected from the Z County Archives in Hebei Province[6] in 2009,[7] is the first to attempt a systematic study of the local functional and political role of a pivotal inclusive regime institution in China—the People's Political Consultative Conference (PPCC, *renmin zhengxie* 人民政协). By exploring the daily operations of the Z County PPCC over two decades,[8] this article demonstrates that this organizational structure of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) United Front (*tongyi zhanxian* 统一战线)[9] plays a far more important political role than previously thought.

Through conducting ideological indoctrination, dispensing preferential treatment, facilitating controlled political participation and performing constant surveillance over non-Communist élites and other societal leaders, the PPCC provides the Party-state with an important platform for co-opting potentially threatening social forces, a forum for policy bargaining, a channel for monitoring various social sectors and a mechanism for offering material benefits to the regime's most loyal and trustworthy collaborators. The Party-state also uses this consultative body as an instrument for garnering feedback from society and building good governance, through soliciting advice from PPCC members and

---

4 Kenneth Jowitt, "Inclusion and Mobilization in European Leninist Regimes", *World Politics*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (October 1975), p. 69.

5 Stephen White, "Economic Performance and Communist Legitimacy", *World Politics*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (April 1986), p. 470.

6 As a typical county in North China, Z County's economic development is modest and the scale of its private sector is limited. Also, no major reform of the County's PPCC system has been attempted. The activities of the Z County PPCC can be best seen as "politics as usual" and thus present a good case study for the PPCC's routine functions in local politics.

7 Supplementary interviews were conducted in late 2010.

8 The full official title of the Z County PPCC is "The Z County Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (*Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi Z xian weiyuan hui*), but in everyday political discourse it is more often referred to as the County PPCC (*xian zhengxie*).

9 For more information on the United Front, see Lyman P. Van Slyke, *Enemies and Friends: The United Front in Chinese Communist History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967); James D. Seymour, *China's Satellite Parties* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1987); Gerry Groot, *Managing Transitions: The Chinese Communist Party, United Front Work, Corporatism, and Hegemony* (London: Routledge, 2004).

organizing periodic inspection tours. Overall, the PPCC helps to consolidate the Communist regime's social base, improve the quality of public services and strengthen the regime's control over society.

Other Explanations for China's Authoritarian Endurance

Lucan Way suggests that, to endure, contemporary authoritarian systems need at least one of three pillars: a "single, highly institutionalized ruling party", an "extensive, well-funded, and cohesive coercive apparatus" or "state discretionary control over the economy".[10] In addition to the crucial *institutional infrastructure*, authoritarian states' tactical *manipulation of institutions*, including ceremonial elections, state symbolism, public finance or pseudo-legislatures, is deemed essential for containing political rivalries, producing compliance, forming alliances and keeping repressive regimes alive.[11]

Recent studies on the durability of the PRC reflect this institutional emphasis. Andrew Nathan sums up the causes of "authoritarian resilience" in the PRC "in the concept of institutionalization".[12] He highlights the importance of "orderly succession processes, meritocratic promotions, bureaucratic differentiation, and channels of mass participation and appeal".[13] In seeking what institutional evolution has contributed to the persistence of the PRC regime, other scholars have emphasized the adaptation

---

[10] Lucan Way, "Resistance to Contagion: Sources of Authoritarian Stability in the Former Soviet Union", in Valerie Bunce, Michael McFaul and Kathryn Stoner-Weiss (eds), *Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Post-Communist World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 230. For authoritarian political parties, also see Jason Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007). For useful overviews of earlier scholarship, some of which focus on structural rather than institutional factors, see Marsha Pripstein Posusney, "Enduring Authoritarianism: Middle East Lessons for Comparative Theory", *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (January 2004), pp. 127-38; Eva Bellin, "The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective", *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (January 2004), pp. 139-57. For cultural explanations, see Yahya Sadowski, "The New Orientalism and the Democracy Debate", *Middle East Report*, No. 183 (July–August 1993), pp. 14-21. For the rentier-state, see Michael L. Ross, "Does Oil Hinder Democracy?", *World Politics*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (April 2001), pp. 325-61.

[11] For electoral manipulation, see Andreas Schedler (ed.), *Electoral Authoritarianism: The Dynamics of Unfree Competition* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006). For ritual and symbolism, see Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbol in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999). For public finance, see Kenneth F. Greene, "The Political Economy of Authoritarian Single-Party Dominance", *Comparative Political Study*, Vol. 47, No. 7 (March 2009), pp. 807-34. For pseudo-legislatures, see Jennifer Gandhi, *Political Institutions under Dictatorship* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[12] Andrew J. Nathan, "Authoritarian Resilience", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (January 2003), p. 6.

[13] *Ibid*., p. 15.

of the Communist Party,[14] the reform of the administrative state,[15] the enhancement of legislative power[16] and the strengthening of the state coercive apparatus.[17] Two groups of research foci are particularly relevant here. The first is the emerging literature on the "Letters and Appeal" (*xin fang* 信访) system—a Maoist mass-line institution that has remained crucial in the post-Mao era as a means of controlled political participation and inclusion, and also as a monitoring mechanism by which the central government can control local cadres.[18] The second group includes important studies on the CCP's selective provision of material benefits or privileges to various sectors, primarily through the *danwei* system,[19] supplemented by a caste-like institution of class labeling (*huafen jieji* 划分阶级).[20] In particular, the CCP's selective reward of Party-state bureaucrats, privileged worker factions and urban dwellers has been thoroughly studied by China scholars since the 1980s.[21]

---

[14] Bruce J. Dickson, *Wealth into Power: The Communist Party's Embrace of China's Private Sector* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); David Shambaugh, *China's Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Kellee S. Tsai, *Capitalism Without Democracy: The Private Sector in Contemporary China* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).

[15] For example, John P. Burns, "Downsizing the Chinese State: Government Retrenchment in the 1990s", *The China Quarterly*, No. 175 (September 2003), pp. 775-802; Jonathan Unger, "'Bridges': Private Business, the Chinese Government and the Rise of New Associations", *The China Quarterly*, No. 147 (September 1996), pp. 795-819; Dali L. Yang, *Remaking the Chinese Leviathan: Market Transition and the Politics of Governance in China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

[16] For example, Kevin J. O'Brien, "Local People's Congresses and Governing China", *The China Journal*, No. 61 (January 2009), pp. 132-41; Young Nam Cho, "From 'Rubber Stamp' to 'Iron Stamp': The Emergence of Chinese Local People's Congresses as Supervisory Powerhouses", *The China Quarterly*, No. 171 (September 2002), pp. 724-40.

[17] Tai Ming Cheung, "Guarding China's Domestic Front Line: The People's Armed Police and China's Stability", *The China Quarterly*, No. 146 (June 1996), pp. 525-47; Murray Scot Tanner and Eric Green, "Principals and Secret Agents: Central versus Local Control Over Policing and Obstacles to 'Rule of Law' in China", *The China Quarterly*, No. 19 (September 2007), pp. 644-70.

[18] For the *xinfang* system, see Xi Chen, "Collective Petitioning and Institutional Conversion", in Kevin O'Brien (ed.), *Popular Protest in China* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 54-70; Cai Yongshun, "Managed Participation in China", *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 119, No. 3 (2004), pp. 425-51; Kevin O'Brien and Li Lianjiang, "The Politics of Lodging Complaints in Rural China", *The China Quarterly*, No. 143 (September 1995), pp. 756-83; Andrew J. Nathan, "Authoritarian Resilience".

[19] See Andrew Walder, *Communist Neo-Traditionalism: Work and Authority in Chinese Industry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Xiaobo Lü and Elizabeth J. Perry (eds), *Danwei: The Changing Chinese Workplace in Historical and Comparative Perspective* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1997).

[20] Richard C. Kraus, *Class Conflict in Chinese Socialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981).

[21] For rewards to Party-state bureaucrats, see John P. Burns, "Rewarding Comrades at the Top in China", in Christopher Hood and B. Guy Peters with G. Lee (eds), *Reward for High*

As Elizabeth Perry notes in her study of the factional politics of Shanghai workers during the Cultural Revolution, beneficiaries of the state's divisive tactics usually turn out to be the regime's most loyal defenders.[22] These studies have provided important insights into the most critical institutions within the Chinese regime and illuminated how the institutional infrastructure and its evolution have upheld the incumbent authoritarian system on different fronts.

Despite these perceptive inquiries into the Chinese Party-state, the role played by the PPCC has been largely ignored by the scholarly community. A unique Chinese institutional invention, the PPCC has been a prominent inclusive regime institution since the founding of the PRC in 1949. Differing from most former soviet regimes, which rely overwhelmingly on either Communist Party membership ("political incorporation") or official organizations ("associational incorporation") for regime inclusion,[23] the PRC regime has consistently used the PPCC to incorporate influential non-Communist élites and societal leaders (*shehui xianda* 社会贤达) into the state apparatus. How does this Chinese institution for regime inclusion play its role? To what extent, and in what manner, has the Communist Party controlled the PPCC? In what way does this prominent inclusive regime institution contribute to system stability in a turbulent domestic and external environment? In the following sections, I map out the institutional development of the local PPCC since 1949, focusing on its re-incarnation as a critical inclusive regime institution in the post-Mao era. Then, I examine the selection of PPCC members and analyze how the CCP controls this highly institutionalized process. Next, I explore the main activities and functions of the Z County PPCC and discuss its usefulness to the Communist regime. The article concludes with a reflection on the relationship between inclusive regime institutions and the resilience of authoritarianism in post-Mao China.

Public Office: Asian and Pacific Rim States (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 49-69; Richard C. Kraus, *Class Conflict in Chinese Socialism*; Hong Yung Lee, *From Revolutionary Cadres to Party Technocrats in Socialist China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991). For privileged worker groups, see Elizabeth J. Perry, *Shanghai on Strike: The Politics of Chinese Labour* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993); Elizabeth J. Perry and Li Xun, *Proletarian Power: Shanghai in the Cultural Revolution* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997); Andrew G. Walder, "Communist Social Structure and Workers' Politics in China", in Victor C. Falkenheim (ed.), *Citizens and Groups in Contemporary China* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1987), pp. 45-89. For urbanites, see Dorothy J. Solinger, *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China: Peasant Migrants, the State, and the Logic of the Market* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Martin K. Whyte (ed.), *One Country, Two Societies: Rural–Urban Inequality in Contemporary China* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Martin K. Whyte and William L. Parish, *Urban Life in Contemporary China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

22 Elizabeth J. Perry and Li Xun, *Proletarian Power*.

23 Stephen White, "Economic Performance and Communist Legitimacy", p. 470.

The Revival of Local Political Consultative Conferences

China's PPCC system was established shortly after the Communist Party's military victory over the Kuomintang (KMT) in 1949. The new[24] National PPCC was convened initially as a constitutional convention for Mao's emerging regime and as an institutional platform for the Communists to garner social support. After the First National People's Congress—the constitutionally designated central legislature—was legally formed in 1954, the PPCC accomplished its "state-building" mission. Notwithstanding, it was retained as a major inclusive regime institution, and continued to legitimize the regime and to consolidate its cross-class inclusiveness. During the Cultural Revolution, the entire PPCC system was kicked into the jammed dustbin of the Party-state's formal institutions. It was not until the advent of Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening-up policies of the early 1980s that the PPCC as an institution was revived (See Figure 1).[25] In December 1982, the reincarnated PPCC National Committee passed a new Charter, claiming "political consultation" (*zhengzhi xieshang* 政治协商) and "democratic supervision" (*minzhu jiandu* 民主监督) as its two primary missions. The "Preamble" to the new PRC Constitution passed in the same year also announced that, as "a broadly based representative organization of the United Front", the PPCC would "play a still more important role in the country's political and social life, in promoting friendship with other countries and in the struggle for socialist modernization and for the reunification and unity of the country".[26]

The post-Mao central leadership prescribed a relatively modest mission for the revived local-level PPCCs. According to a circular issued by the General Office of the CCP's Central Committee in January 1983, local PPCCs were instruments for the Party-state to enhance its connections and collaboration with non-Communist élites and societal leaders.[27] On the basis of this directive, the Z County Communist Party Committee issued Document No. 14 in 1984, setting forth four concrete tasks for the re-organized[28] county PPCC: to attract all sorts of positive factors (into

---

[24] In 1946, a "Political Consultative Conference" was summoned by the KMT, in an attempt to form a joint post-war government with various political forces, including the Communists. The failure of that conference led China into a three-year Civil War that ended with the founding of the PRC. In the PRC's official discourse, the post-1949 PPCC under Communist auspices is later referred to as the "New" Political Consultative Conference. See *Dangdai Zhongguo de renmin zheng xie* (China Today: The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, hereafter DDZGZX) (Beijing: Dangdai Zhongguo Chubanshe [1993], pp. 1-12).

[25] DDZGZX, p. 245.

[26] Preamble to the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, see http:// www.gov.cn/english/2005-08/05/content_20813.htm (accessed 24 December 2010). However, neither the formal structure nor the functionality of the PPCC is defined by the Constitution.

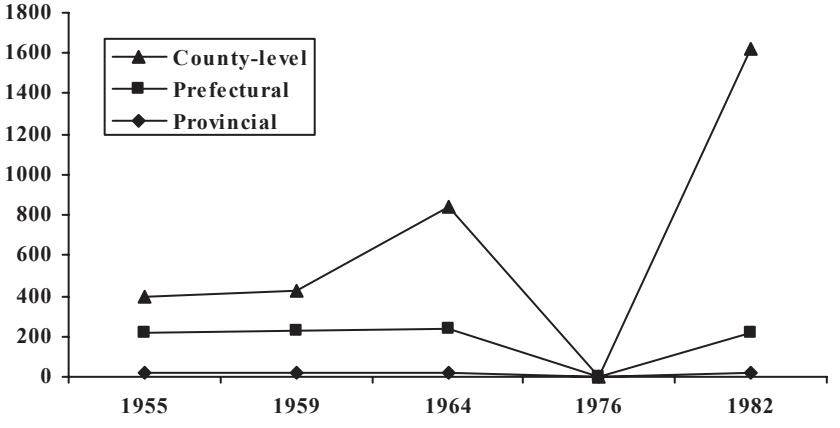
[27] DDZGZX, p. 404.

[28] Similar to the National PPCC, the local PPCC in Z County was originally founded in December 1949, two years after the People's Liberation Army took over the territory. It was

socialist construction); to allow the "old comrades" (who were victimized during the Cultural Revolution) to play an appropriate political role; to maintain friendship with non-Communist élites who have socialist spirit; and to liaise with people from various social sectors.

In this founding document, Z County's Communist leadership intentionally framed the revival of the county's PPCC within the overall post-Cultural-Revolution recovery process, stressing the institution's central enterprise in healing the traumatic legacies of the Maoist era and incorporating the new social strata[29] starting to emerge in the post-Mao reforms. Since then, Z County's PPCC has been summoned annually and its members re-selected every five years; nonetheless, its institutional mission, organizational structure and political functionality have remained largely unchanged.

Figure 1: The Number of Local PPCCs Nationwide (1955–82)



Data Source: *Dangdai Zhongguo de renmin zheng xie* (DDZGZX), pp. 402-05.

The Selection of PPCC Members

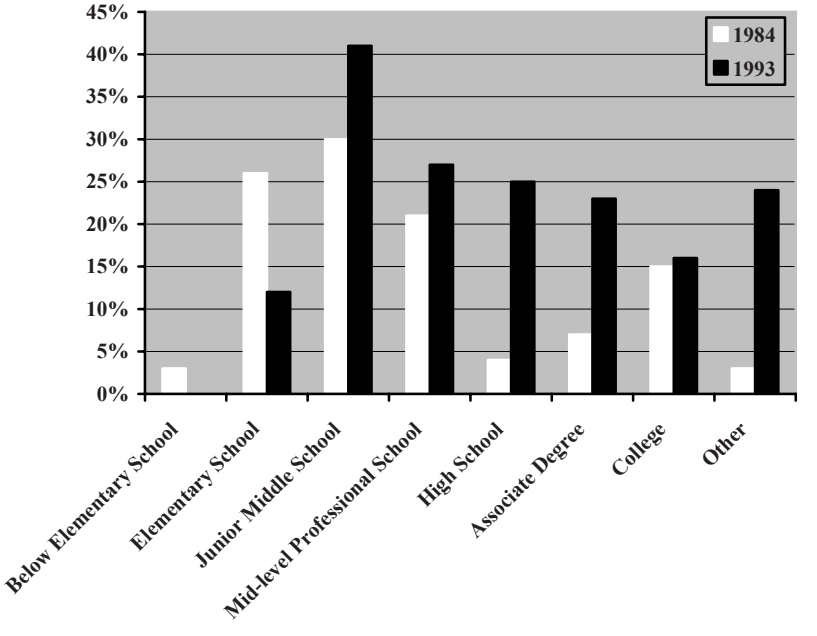
Membership recruitment decisively shapes the nature, status and function of any political institution. As the main inclusive regime institution for the Chinese Party-state, the PPCC has a rigorous set of admission criteria. According to the 1983 Central Circular, potential candidates for county-level PPCCs must belong to one of nine categories of local élites or social leaders, namely, non-Communist intellectuals, (private) business owners, ethnic minorities, patriotic religious clerics, family and friends of those who fled to Taiwan with the Kuomintang (in or around 1949),

disbanded in December 1954 (after the County People's Congress was convened in July 1954) and remained closed from 1954 to 1984. See *Z xian zhi* (Gazeteer of Z County) (Beijing: Fangzhi Chubanshe, 1999), p. 490.

[29] In the official discourse, "new social strata" refers to private entrepreneurs, households with specific expertise and local professionals owning private practices (such as medical doctors, veterinarians, drivers or service providers for various agricultural productions).

returned overseas Chinese and their families, surrendered former Kuomintang military officers, members of the eight "democratic" parties and influential people without Party affiliation, or Taiwanese.[30]

Figure 2: The Education Level of PPCC Members (1984 and 1993)



Source: "Zhengxie Z xian diyijie weiyuanhui weiyuan dengjice" (Member Roster of the 1st Session of the Z County PPCC), *Archival Document 6-01* (1984); "Zhengxie Z xian disijie weiyuanhui weiyuan huamingce" (Member Roster of the 4th Session of the Z County PPCC), *Archival Document 6-03* (1993).

In addition, as noted in an internal document, Z County's Communist Party Committee further requires that potential PPCC members must have "good political and moral character", be "knowledgeable, talented and influential", "have ... regular contact with the Communist Party" and "love the Party, love the socialist motherland and be willing to advocate the unification of China".[31] A report issued by the county PPCC reveals that certain meritocratic criteria for member selection are also in effect, including the level of formal education (or equivalent professional knowledge), the ability to participate in policy deliberation and the

[30] DDZGZX, p. 404.

[31] "Guanyu choujian Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi Z xian weiyuanhui de tongzhi" (A Circular on the Creation of Z County Committee of the PPCC), *Archival Document 3-05* (7 February 1984).

extent of social influence.[32] Although the education level of PPCC members rose considerably due to the overall improvement of the post-Mao educational system (see Figure 2), candidacy for the county PPCC has been overwhelmingly determined by the Communist Party's evaluation of each candidate's loyalty to and identification with the regime. As one nomination form shows, the only comment made by the nominating Party branch on the candidate is that "[h]e wholeheartedly implements central policies and supports socialism. His stance has been firm in terms of sticking to the Four Cardinal Principles (*sixiang jiben yuanze* 四项基本原则)." Questions about the candidate's professional knowledge or capability for policy deliberation are simply ignored.[33]

The actual selection process is operated by the Communist Party's United Front Work Department (CPUFD, *tongyizhanxian gongzuobu* 统一战线工作部). A report on the selection of members for the 2nd Session of Z County's PPCC shows that this process normally consists of five steps. First, the CPUFD scrutinizes the profile of each incumbent member and decides if a renewal of membership can be granted. Renewal decisions are made based on a number of objective factors set by the Communist Party's county committee, including the age[34] and health of individual members. The occupational variation amongst the entire membership body is also a particularly decisive factor.[35] Incumbent members who are also Communist Party members may be asked to vacate their seats in order to "balance" the rate of Communist to non-Communist PPCC members.[36] Second, the CPUFD invites all the township-level Communist Party Committees and major "work units" (*danwei* 单位) supervised by the county government to nominate candidates for any vacated seats. Nominating agencies are required to recommend candidates who are politically qualified. In addition, close attention should be paid to the principal leaders of the local "democratic" minor parties, important religious clerics, successful private business owners and other influential persons belonging to the nine centrally defined membership categories. The CPUFD then conducts an internal review of the political background and performance of each candidate

---

[32] "Z xian zhengxie huanjie lingdao xiaozu guanyu huanjie choubei gongzuo qingkuang de baogao" (A Report on the Conditions of the Re-selection of PPCC Members of Z County), *Archival Document 1-05* (11 April 1990), p. 3.

[33] "Zhengxie Z xian disanjie weiyuanhui weiyuan tuijianbiao" (Recommendation Form of Z County PPCC Member), *Archival Document 6-02*.

[34] As a general rule, Communist Party members older than 60 and non-Communists older than 65 are not granted membership renewal. In 1990, these age limits were lowered to 58 for CCP members and 63 for non-Communists. See "Z xian zhengxie huanjie choubei lingdao xiaozu guanyu huanjie choubei gongzuo de baogao" (A Report by the Leading Group for the Re-selection of Members of the Z County PPCC), *Archival Document 1-01* (6 May 1987); *Archival Document 1-05*, p. 2.

[35] Membership renewal should not be granted to members who have changed job and hence lost occupational "representativeness" or to members with a serious health problem. See *Archival Document 1-01*; *Archival Document 1-05*, p. 2.

[36] *Archival Document 1-01*, p. 3 ; *Archival Document 1-95*, p. 3.

and only endorses the qualified ones. After that, a short list of endorsed candidates is sent to the Communist Party's county standing committee (*xianwei changwei* 县委常委) for substantial deliberation and approval. Finally, the incumbent local PPCC committee will meet to grant *pro forma* approval to all new members selected by the Communist Party and announce the results to the public.[37]

Table 1: Constituencies in Z County's PPCC (1987–93)

Constituency	**Number of PPCC Members in Each Constituency**		
	1987	**1990**	**1993**
Party, Government, Military and Mass Organizations	20	25	23
Science and Technology	21	16	19
Cultural and Education Professions	18	21	17
Health and Medical Professions	11	11	7
Industry, Construction and Transportation	13	14	21
Banking and Finance	11	13	13
Agriculture and Forestry	12	13	20
Business and Commerce	6	7	1
Ethnic Minorities and Religious Clerics	8	8	9
Family of Taiwan/Hong Kong/Macau Residents	8	11	10
Special Members (*without constituency*)	4	3	6
Township and Village Enterprises (*added in 1990*)	N/A	13	14
Affiliation not legible in original document	N/A	N/A	10
Total	132	155	170

Data Sources: *Archival Document 1-01* (6 May 1987); *Archival Document 1-05* (11 April 1990); *Archival Document 6-03* (1993).

After appointment, members of the county PPCC are assigned to different "constituencies" (*jiebie* 界别), divided by occupation (see Table 1). For the PPCC's formal events (for example, plenary sessions, inspection tours) and some more casual activities, members are required to participate only within their designated constituency. Contrary to the local People's Congresses, within the PPCC's membership body the percentage of Communist Party members is intentionally maintained at around 40 per cent in order to show the institution's broad "inclusiveness"[38] (see Figure 3).[39] Unlike the *national* PPCC, in *local*

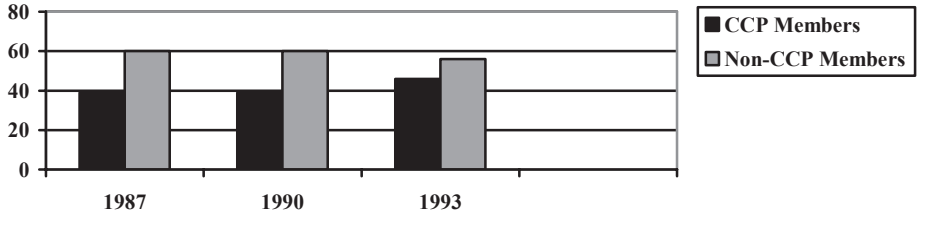
[37] *Archival Document 1-01*.

[38] *Archival Document 1-05*, p. 1.

[39] The percentage of non-Communist PPCC members dropped slightly in the early 1990s. This was mostly due to the Communist Party's aggressive effort to recruit entrepreneurs, technological experts, professionals and other local élites under the Jiang Zemin

PPCCs minor parties, ethnic minority groups and religious associations are barred from forming independent delegations. At the county level, minority groups have a weak presence in local politics and the institutional barrier for group representation faces little explicit resistance. However, Party officials may admit in private that members with similar ethnic or religious bonds usually enjoy a closer personal network among themselves. The political implications of this kind of informal network are still unclear.[40] Nevertheless, despite the fact that Communist Party members do not *per se* form a dominant majority in the Z County PPCC, the fact that constituencies have to be formed along occupational lines guarantees that no other group sharing a coherent political, ethnic or religious identity is able to offer an organized challenge to the Communist Party's control over this institution.

Figure 3: Percentages of CCP and Non-CCP Members in Z County's PPCC



Data Source: *Archival Document 1-01* (6 May 1987); *Archival Document 1-05* (11 April 1990); *Archival Document 6-03* (1993). (Due to the poor printing quality of the original archival document, the political affiliation of 13 members is not legible in the 1993 dataset.)

Functions of the PPCC in Local Politics

Z County PPCC is given four responsibilities by the local Communist leadership: political study (*zhengzhi xuexi* 政治学习); member liaison (*weiyuan lianluo gongzuo* 委员联络工作); inspection (*shicha gongzuo* 视察工作); and the provision of advice to the local Party (*yijian he jianyi* 意见和建议). In addition, the county PPCC is in charge of collecting and publishing local cultural and historical materials (*wenshi ziliao gongzuo* 文史资料工作).[41] Z County PPCC meets annually for a plenary session, usually right after the Lunar New Year or in the early spring, the traditional off-season in rural China.

---

administration. For the CCP's changing recruitment practice in the 1990s, see Andrew Walder, Bobai Li and Donald J. Treiman, "Politics and Life Chances in a State Socialist Regime: Dual Career Paths into the Urban Chinese Élite, 1949–1996", *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 65, No. 2 (April 2000), pp. 191-209; Bruce J. Dickson, *Wealth into Power*; David Shambaugh, *China's Communist Party*.

40 Interview with the General Secretary of Z County PPCC, 6 December 2010.

41 "Tuchu sige zhongdian, gaohao sange zhuanbian, kaichuang zhengxie gongzuo xinjumian" (Emphasize Four Items, Manage Three Transitions, Open a New Chapter of the Work of the PPCC), *Archival Document 1-12* (26 December 1993).

Political Study and Liaison

As the main inclusive platform for the Communist Party, the top priority for Z County's PPCC is to provide ideological education for its members. Despite the Party-state's declining capacity in ideological mobilization in the post-Mao era, the entire PPCC system appears serious in undertaking this task. An official instruction issued by the National PPCC acknowledges that "it is a tremendously important task for the PPCC to organize people from various social sectors to study current affairs and the fundamental theories of Marxism-Leninism attentively, so that they can ... reform their thoughts ... [and] cope accordingly with the latest development of our society".[42] In an internal document, the Z County PPCC reports to the Party that "arranging and advocating political study (for all the PPCC members) is the most important duty for us".[43] Political study is conducted in many forms, including group meetings, individual self-study, sharing sessions and joint lectures. The contents of these sessions involve the latest directives from the central Party-state or propaganda materials on the Party's United Front. Political study serves also as a forum allowing the Party-state to promote public policies to PPCC members in an effort to solicit their support. As Z County PPCC notes:

> [W]henever an important decision or new policy is made by the Central Committee or the county committee (of the Communist Party), we will hold an enlarged meeting of the standing committee of the PPCC, or organize discussion sessions with members from the relevant sectors of the society, or pay visits to individual PPCC members (whose interests may be affected), or issue blanket outlines for self-study and so on ... So that all of our PPCC members can sympathize with the new policy, grasp its meaning and implement it voluntarily in reality.[44]

Being the most prominent agent for regime inclusion, the Z County PPCC also reaches out proactively to its members. Through the PPCC system, rents and spoils are granted to this tiny portion of society, with the hope of strengthening their loyalty to and identification with the regime. In the official documents, these activities come under the category of "member liaison". In Z County, routine liaison work can be carried out in the form of Party-state bureaucrats paying home visits to PPCC members, organizing exclusive social gatherings, offering official condolences or maintaining constant contact by sending newsletters and other printed materials.[45] In order to perform this duty, there are 19 "Liaison Work Groups" (*lianluo gongzuo zu* 联络工作组) staffed by full-time Party-state bureaucrats, with at least one stationed in each township within the county. This allows the Party-state to monitor the PPCC

---

[42] DDZGZX, p. 445.

[43] *Archival Document 1-12*, p. 1.

[44] "Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi Z xian di'erjie weiyuanhui changwu weiyuanhui gongzuo baogao" (Working Report of the Standing Committee of the 2nd PPCC Session of Z County), *Archival Document 1-06* (11 April 1990), p. 3.

[45] *Archival Document 1-12*, p. 1.

members' political stance, identify potential grievances and forge among the members a sense of being favorably linked to the Communist regime.

An essential aspect of "liaison work" is the provision of preferential treatment or privilege to selected PPCC members. At times, benefits are granted that bypass the Party-state's normal bureaucratic procedures and regulations. Due to political sensitivity, detailed information is extremely limited in official records; however, some clues can be identified. Some cases involve the reinstatement of employment. For example, the PPCC helped a member, referred to as 'S', to reclaim his job at some point between 1984 and 1987, after he had been arbitrarily dismissed from work during the Cultural Revolution because of family ties with Taiwan.[46] Other cases involve the issuing of exceptional permits, often referred to in Chinese as *teshi teban* (特事特办), which are otherwise unavailable according to state regulations. For instance, shortly after becoming a PPCC member, a member referred to as 'R', who had a Taiwanese identity and had just returned from Japan, was granted residential permits (*hukou* 户口) for her entire family, although such permits had previously been denied her for three decades after 1962 on the basis of central and local policies.[47] It appears, however, that more recently the offering of material benefits has been focused on the provision of business information and market access. Indeed, since the 1990s, a main task for Z County's PPCC is to help its members "get rich". The PPCC organizes seminars, information-sharing sessions or lectures exclusively for them, providing government-controlled business opportunities and market information.[48] The PPCC also encourages and facilitates business co-operation amongst its entrepreneurial members.[49] Members with overseas family ties usually enjoy more substantial assistance. For instance, a local PPCC report emphasizes that one of its top priorities is to help members who are "relatives of current residents of Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan" (*sanshu* 三属) to engage in business activities and get rich as fast as possible. As the document explains:

> [While] residents of Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan are concerned about our general policies, they are more interested in the concrete change in the economic condition of their family members who currently live here. Therefore, helping *sanshu* to get rich can promote our overseas United Front work enormously.[50]

In addition to the provision of valuable market information and financial assistance, the local PPCC also steps into solving "real-life difficulties and concerns" of *sanshu*, such as housing and education or the supply of fertilizer and

---

46 "Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi Z xian diyijie weiyuanhui changwu weiyuanhui gongzuo baogao" (Working Report of the Standing Committee of the 1st PPCC Session of Z County), *Archival Document 1-02* (7 May 1987), p. 5.

47 *Archival Document 1-02* (7 May 1987), p. 5.

48 *Ibid*.

49 *Archival Document 1-17*, p. 6.

50 *Archival Document 1-06*, p. 4.

diesel fuel.[51] Similar arrangements are available, to various extents, for PPCC members who are successful entrepreneurs, opinion leaders, intellectuals and leading members of ethnic or religious groups.[52] In recent years, this kind of assistance has extended to the financial sector, with a recent working report stating that, in 2009 alone, the county PPCC helped its younger members to obtain more than 20 million yuan in credit from state-owned banks.[53] An internal document reveals that, from 1984 to 2008, local members, with help from the county PPCC, established 238 factories and donated more than 40 million yuan to a national charity (*Guangcai Shiye* 光彩事业[54]). During the same period, the local PPCC provided 668 pieces of business information, arranged 800 million yuan of investment capital and introduced more than 1,510 industrial projects to its members.[55] A local PPCC member also admitted in an interview that "the county PPCC provides many concrete benefits to our PPCC members (*wei zhengxie weiyuan ban shishi* 为政协委员办实事), and this definitely strengthens our ties with the Communist Party and solidifies our faith in the socialist system".[56]

Today, ideological indoctrination and preferential treatment via political study and liaison work have become two of the primary functions performed by the county PPCC, through which the Party-state consistently strengthens its collaboration with the non-Communist élites and societal leaders and consolidates their identification with the regime.

Inspection, Investigation and Performance Review

The county PPCC also organizes periodical inspection tours and sponsors investigative research on specific policy issues. Inspection tours take place throughout the year, with topics varying from the quality of local school buildings

---

51 *Archival Document 1-06*, p. 5; "Zhengxie Z xian disanjie weiyuanhui changwu weiyuanhui gongzuo baogao" (Working Report of the Standing Committee of the 3rd PPCC Session of Z County), *Archival Document 1-11* (21 March 1992), p. 6; "Zhengxie Z xian disanjie changwu weiyuanhui gongzuo baogao", *Archival Document 1-08* (25 March 1991), p. 3.

52 Interview with the General Secretary of Z County PPCC, 6 December 2010.

53 "Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi Z xian diqijie weiyuanhui changwu weiyuanhui gongzuo baogao" (Working Report of the Standing Committee of the 7th PPCC Session of Z County), *Archival Document 10-2* (1 February 2010).

54 Initiated in the mid-1900s, *Guangce Shiye* is a national organization with charitable goals. Under the auspices of the Central United Front Work Department of the CCP and with its membership primarily comprised of private business owners, this organization has become one of the major institutional structures which the Party-state utilizes to enlist financial support from China's *nouveaux riches* for the central state's poverty alleviation efforts. See Zheng Wantong, "Nuli kaichuang Guangcai Shiye gongzuo xinjumian" (Striving to Open a New Chapter of the *Guangcai Shiye*), in Zhang Xuwu (ed.), *Zhongguo siying jingji nianjian* (The Yearbook of China's Private Businesses) (Beijing: Zhonghua Gongshang Lianhe Chubanshe, 1996), pp. 117-20.

55 *Archival Document 10-1*, p. 26.

56 Interview with representatives of Z County PPCC, 6 December 2010.

to the appropriate handling of Muslim food. Disclosure of problems by PPCC members in these inspection tours almost always leads to intervention by the county's principal Party bosses. For example, during an inspection tour, PPCC members discovered that school buildings in L Township were unsafe, and the issue was immediately addressed by the township government.[57] Individual PPCC members can also conduct inspections alone. One PPCC member, referred to as 'D', conducted such an inspection of illegal gambling at one of the county's major marketplaces, which led to a local government campaign that focused on the elimination of illegal transactions.[58] A PPCC report also reveals that through seven inspection tours conducted in 1999 individual members had discovered that some local restaurants registered to serve Halal food to Muslims had failed to observe religious protocols fully, a discovery which resulted in serious governmental sanctions against the offending enterprises.[59] Since 1984, the county PPCC has completed special inspection and/or investigative research on various important policy issues, including the development of the local cotton industry (1984), the reform of the county career training school (1985), the reinvigoration of township and village enterprises (1988, 1989 and 1990), the strengthening of local tax collection (1991), the living conditions of laid-off workers (1999), the construction of major roads (1999), the management of a local Internet café (2001), rural health insurance (2004), social welfare for disabled people (2006), urbanization and the re-development of rural lands (2007). Most of these policy recommendations eventually led to major policy change at the county level.[60]

For more systemic problems, the PPCC may request a special Political Consultation Session (*zhengzhi xieshang hui* 政治协商会) with the county's top Party-state cadres. At such a session held on 1 September 1990, participants discussed a whole array of serious problems in local governance, from the quality of health care to the proper management of extra-budgetary funding.[61] Some PPCC members have been invited to serve as Special Inspectors (*teyue jiandu yuan* 特约监督员) to constantly monitor the quality of public service provided by different public agencies, including the public hospital, Tax Bureau, TV and radio station and the People's Court.[62] In 2000 alone, 66 PPCC members were appointed by 16 different

---

57 "Zhengxie Z xian weiyuanhui qian bageyue de gongzuo zongjie he hou sigeyue de gongzuo yijian" (A Report on the Work of Z County PPCC in the First Four Months and Proposals for the Next Eight Months), *Archival Document 3-03* (25 August 1990), p. 2.

58 *Archival Document 1-08*, p. 4.

59 "Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi Z xian diwujie weiyuanhui changwu weiyuanhui gongzuo baogao" (Working Report of the Standing Committee of the 5th PPCC Session of Z County), *Archival Document 1-15* (9 March 1999), pp. 5-6.

60 "Xin Z xian zhi gao di ba zhang" (Manuscript of Chapter 8 of the New Z County Gazetteer), *Archival Document 10-1*, pp. 15-20.

61 *Archival Document 3-03*, pp. 2-3.

62 "Zhengxie disanjie changwu weiyuanhui gongzuo baogao", *Archival Document 1-11* (21 March 1992), p. 5; "Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi Z xian diwujie weiyuanhui changwu weiyuanhui gongzuo baogao", *Archival Document 1-17* (22 January 2000), p. 4.

local law-enforcement agencies to this unpaid position.[63] Another important supervising mechanism is the county PPCC's annual performance review of county cadres. Although the outcome of the review is neither institutionally nor legally binding, discouraging scores are still perceived by most cadres as "face-losing" (*diu lian* 丢脸) and those who receive exceptionally bad evaluations are usually asked by their supervisors to visit the PPCC for face-to-face "self-criticism" and discussion.[64]

Together, inspections, investigations and annual performance reviews undertaken by the PPCC serve as important mechanisms that help the Party-state to identify the most damaging problems in local governance, and on that basis to improve the quality of public service. Equally important is the fact that inspection and other forms of interactions with the Party-state can nurture a strong sense of political involvement, which in turn can solidify members' ties with the political regime.

Opinions, Complaints and Suggestions

As an advisory body, the county PPCC is also entitled to launch complaints or provide advice to the Communist Party's county committee and the county government. In official discourse, this function is categorically referred to as "proposal work" (*ti'an gongzuo* 提案工作). A special working committee is created under the county PPCC to oversee this proposal work.

At the county PPCC's annual plenary sessions, most proposals are presented by individual members, or jointly by members within the same constituency. In addition, officially recognized mass organizations (such as the Official Trade Union, the Youth League and Women's Federation) may submit their own proposals through their representatives in the PPCC. When the PPCC is not in session, members are allowed to mail in their proposals year-round.[65] Nevertheless, certain matters and situations are barred from discussion in any proposal. These include: issues related to state secrecy; disagreement by Communist Party members with the Party's decision on personnel affairs; civil disputes, legal litigation or complaints against a specific individual; requests to solve a specific problem for individual PPCC members or their family; issues beyond the jurisdiction of the county government; and issues without concrete content[66] or currently being handled by Party or governmental agencies.[67]

Proposals are divided into three categories: general ideas on a certain public issue or on governmental performance (opinions), negative comments on a specific incident or policy (complaints) and advice on the making of a new policy or the modification of an existing one (suggestions). The working committee reviews all proposals, before referring most of them to the respective Party or governmental

---

63 *Archival Document 10-1*, p. 25.

64 Interview with the Deputy Head of Z County Department of United Front Works, 8 December 2010.

65 "Zhengxie Z xian weiyuanhui ti'an gongzuo tiaoli (shi xing)" (Regulations on the Proposal Work of the Z County PPCC [Trial Edition]), *Archival Document 2-02*, p. 4.

66 This implies discussion of political ideology and so on.

67 *Archival Document 2-02*, p. 5.

agencies for consideration.[68] All agencies in Z County are required to respond in writing to every referred proposal; at times, special inspection tours or political consultation sessions are arranged. For example, a complaint from PPCC members relating to back-pay for peasant workers in the county led to the responsible agencies requesting a special consultation meeting with the PPCC before the proposal was officially answered.[69] Responses must satisfy both the proposer and the working committee; where the response fails to satisfy either party, it must be reconsidered or the original proposal will be referred directly to the Communist Party's county committee.

On the most pressing issues, the PPCC will pass formal resolutions through a vote system, requesting that certain decisions be made by the Party-state authorities in a timely fashion. For example, one document shows that in 1992 the PPCC issued a resolution asking the county government to expedite its administrative review on the split of a local manufacturing factory.[70] Although formal resolutions are rare, their high publicity can place tremendous political pressure on the Party-state to take the policy direction preferred by the county PPCC.

Opinions, complaints and suggestions provided by the PPCC are treated seriously and processed quite efficiently by the local Party-state. Figure 4[71] shows the changing

---

[68] Unlike the local People's Congress, questions and proposals from PPCC members can be directed to both the Communist Party's working departments and the local government. Given that the PPCC is the organizational structure of the Communist Party's United Front, the Party itself is obliged to answer questions or proposals raised by the PPCC (but not the People's Congress, which is the nominal legislature).

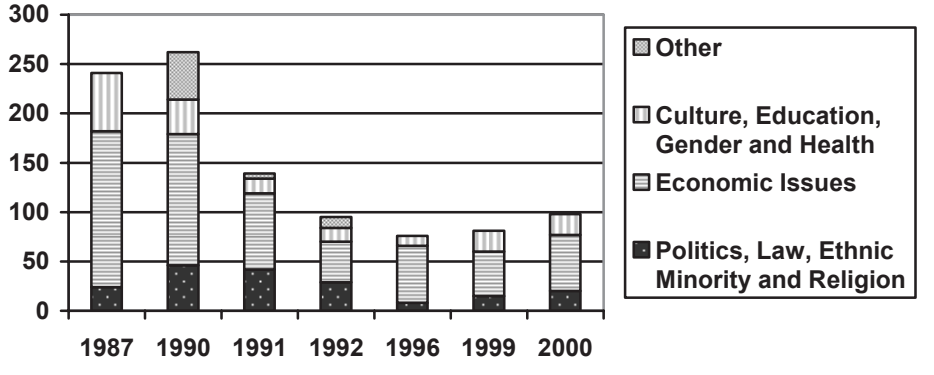
[69] "Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi Z xian diqijie weiyuanhui changwu weiyuanhui guanyu qijie sanci huiyi yilai ti'an gongzuo qingkuang de baogao" (Report by the Standing Committee of the 7th Session of the Z County PPCC on the Processing of Proposals Since the 3rd Plenary Session), *Archival Document 10-3* (1 February 2010), p. 3.

[70] "Guanyu zhixian chang gaiwei xianban jitiqiye de jianyi" (A Suggestion on Changing the Wool Thread Manufacturing Factory into a County Level Enterprise), *Archival Document 3-01* (24 December 1992).

[71] Data sources for Figure 4: "Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi Z xian diyijie weiyuanhui ti'an gongzuo weiyuanhui guanyu ti'an gongzuo qingkuang de baogao" (Report by the Sub-Committee on Proposal Work of the 1st Session of the Z County PPCC on the Processing of Proposals), *Archival Document 1-03* (7 May 1987); "Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi Z xian di'erjie weiyuanhui ti'an gongzuo weiyuanhui ti'an gongzuo qingkuang baogao" (Report by the Sub-Committee on Proposal Work of the 2nd Session of the Z County PPCC on the Processing of Proposals), *Archival Document 1-07* (11 April 1990); "Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi Z xian disanjie weiyuanhui ti'an weiyuanhui guanyu sanjie yici huiyi yilai ti'an gongzuo qingkuang baogao" (Report by the Sub-Committee on Proposal Work of the 3rd Session of the Z County PPCC on the Processing of Proposals since the 1st Plenary Meeting), *Archival Document 1-09* (25 March 1991); "Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi Z xian disanjie weiyuanhui ti'an weiyuanhui guanyu sanjie er'ci huiyi yilai ti'an gongzuo qingkuang baogao" (Report by the Sub-Committee on Proposal Work of the 3rd Session of the Z County PPCC on the Processing of Proposals since the 2nd Plenary Meeting), *Archival Document 1-10* (21 March 1992); "Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi Z xian disijie weiyuanhui ti'an weiyuanhui guanyu sijie sanci huiyi yilai ti'an gongzuo qingkuang baogao" (Report by the Sub-Committee on Proposal Work of the 4th Session of the Z County

composition of proposal topics from 1987 to 2000. While topics vary widely, from gender equality to local political reform, economic and social welfare issues appear to predominate. Figure 5 shows the reported status of the proposals received at annual sessions from 1991 to 2000, indicating that the majority of referred proposals had been resolved or taken care of by Party-state agencies. Complaints from the PPCC usually have direct policy consequences. For example, in 1989, the PPCC's complaint on tax evasion led to a thorough investigation into the local tax bureau as well as most local companies. Of the companies investigated, 603 did not have an appropriate business license, while 2,523 owed tax to the county government.[72] Other such cases involved traffic jams at major intersections (1996), excessive charges collected by the telephone company (1999), defects in the local electric grid (2003–06), and Internet cafés that illegally admitted children (2004).[73]

Figure 4: Composition of Topics of the Proposals Received by Z County PPCC Annual Sessions



Data Sources: Compiled from various archival documents, see Footnote 71.

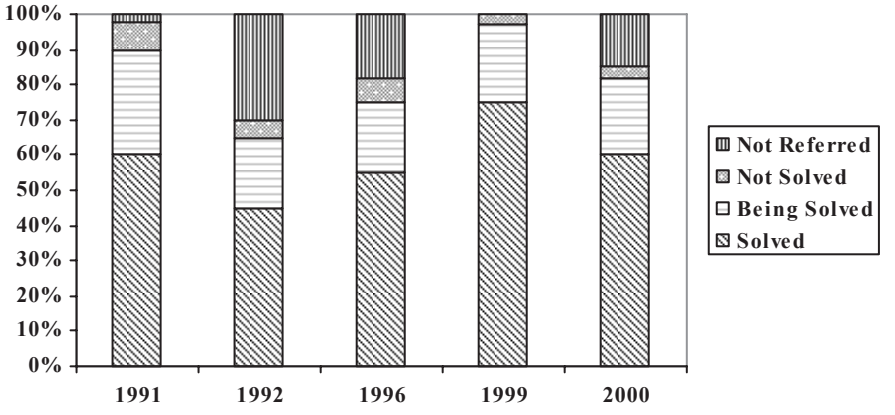
Overall, proposal work provides the Party-state with another important channel to receive societal feedback on governance, to improve the quality of public service and to incorporate influential social leaders into the establishment through limited political empowerment and controlled participation.

PPCC on the Processing of Proposals since the 3rd Plenary Meeting), *Archival Document 1-16* (14 March 1996); "Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi Z xian diwujie weiyuanhui ti'an weiyuanhui guanyu wujie yici huiyi yilai ti'an gongzuo qingkuang de baogao" (Report by the Sub-Committee on Proposal Work of the 5th Session of the Z County PPCC on the Processing of Proposals since the 1st Plenary Meeting), *Archival Document 1-14* (9 March 1999); "Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi Z xian diwujie weiyuanhui ti'an weiyuanhui guanyu wujie er'ci huiyi yilai ti'an gongzuo qingkuang de baogao" (Report by the Sub-Committee on Proposal Work of the 5th Session of the Z County PPCC on the Processing of Proposals since the 2nd Plenary Meeting), *Archival Document 1-18* (22 January 2000).

72 *Archival Document 10-1*, p. 27.

73 *Ibid*., pp. 39-32.

Figure 5: Status of Proposals Received at Previous Year's PPCC Annual Session



Data Sources: *Archival Document 1-09* (25 March 1991); *Archival Document 1-10* (21 March 1992); A*rchival Document 1-16* (14 March 1996); *Archival Document 1-14* (9 March 1999); *Archival Document 1-18* (22 January 2000).

Information Gathering and Reporting

As a United Front organization, the PPCC is also responsible for garnering social information, monitoring the political condition of society and reporting back to the Party-state. Authoritarian regimes are in constant need of reliable means to solicit societal feedback, monitor the level of political loyalty and identify problems within the ruling apparatus. In Z County, the PPCC is one of the most important institutions shouldering this responsibility.[74] The PPCC needs to assist the Party to "stabilize the overall political condition" and serves as a "crucial channel through which the Party communicates properly with the society".[75] The Communist Party explicitly acknowledges the essential role played by the PPCC in obtaining and reporting socio–political information (*fanying sheqing minyi* 反映社情民意), deeming it a mission "with enormous political sensitivity and significant importance".[76]

In Z County, the local PPCC is required to obtain and report at least ten categories of information, including: the attitude of influential local élites towards the Party-state's newly announced policies; situations that might cause major

---

[74] Other such institutions include the internal reference system of the news media, the Letters and Visits Bureau and the Disciplinary Inspection Committee.

[75] "Jiaqiang zuzhi lingdao, tigao ban'an zhiliang" (Strengthen Leadership and Enhance the Quality of Proposal Processing), *Archival Document 4-02*, p. 1.

[76] "Zai jinyibu zuohao fanying sheqing minyi gongzuo dianhua huiyi shang de jianghua" (A Speech delivered at the Teleconference on Further Improving the Work of Reporting Social Conditions and Public Opinions), *Archival Document 4-03* (17 June 1997), p. 2.

social instability and chaos; sudden changes in mass mentality; cases of cadre corruption that might arouse public anger; or significant problems in religious activities.[77] In addition to these more serious scenarios, the local PPCC also has a role to play in reporting on large-scale social grievances. For example, in 1993, the *PPCC Newsletter* and a number of individual reports from PPCC members all reported that "the low salary of people-sponsored school teachers (*minban jiaoshi* 民办教师) ... might cause problems in the overall stability of the teaching staff of this county's elementary school system". The Communist Party responded efficiently with a series of salary adjustments for elementary school teachers.[78] In another issue of the *Newsletter*, the PPCC complained about excessive governmental levies imposed on street vendors, warning that this could trigger serious resistance if not changed promptly. A thorough investigation was immediately ordered by the county's Communist Party committee.[79] Since 1996, the county PPCC has edited 62 issues of a periodical internal publication entitled "Social Information and Public Opinion" (*sheqing minyi xinxi* 社情民意信息) and reported 1,285 pieces of information to the local Party-state.[80] During periods of serious state emergency, such as the SARS epidemic in 2003, information-gathering and reporting was undertaken more proactively and frequently.[81] Overall, information-gathering and reporting by the PPCC serves two purposes: to enable the Party-state to keep a close eye on the political situation within society, and to provide PPCC members with an effective channel to represent their social interest and make their voice heard.

The Plenary Session

The annual plenary session is the most important forum for the county PPCC to perform its designated functions of supervision and consultation. Each year, the county PPCC usually meets for this plenary session one week before the annual session of the local People's Congress. The timing of the session is designed to ease logistics and to allow Party bosses to attend.[82] Furthermore, the agenda of the plenary sessions of the PPCC almost always includes a keynote report from the county government, a briefing by the PPCC leaders, a report on the proposals received at the previous plenary session and the passage of a "political resolution"

---

77 *Archival Document 4-03* (17 June 1997), pp. 6-7.

78 "Z xian zhengxie jianxun" (Newsletter of the Z County PPCC), *Archival Document 5-03* (28 May 1993), pp. 1-2.

79 "Z xian zhengxie jianxun", *Archival Document 5-01* (10 August 1990), p. 1.

80 *Archival Document 10-1*, p. 1.

81 *Ibid*., p. 17.

82 "Gaijin quanhui kaifa, tigao xieshang zhiliang" (Reform the Methods of Plenary Sessions, Improve the Quality of Political Consulation), *Archival Document 4-04* (no date available), pp. 1-2.

reiterating the PPCC's overall support for the Party-state.[83] However, beyond these bureaucratic and ceremonial formalities, the plenary session is more importantly an occasion for PPCC members to express their concerns and grievances directly to local Party bosses. It becomes a convenient channel for non-Communist élites to exert policy influence.

In sum, the concrete functions and activities of the county PPCC bring to the fore its political role as a pivotal inclusive regime institution in local politics. For the Party-state, the PPCC is a vehicle for ideological indoctrination, a mechanism for dispensing preferential treatment and privileged access to political power, a channel to monitor political loyalty and an instrument to improve the quality of governance.

The PPCC and the Communist Regime

As a crucial inclusive regime institution, the PPCC system appears to have played a much more important role in Chinese politics than previously thought. The PPCC's most evident value to the Communist regime is to control and co-opt non-Communist élites and societal leaders. Autocratic regimes face a constant danger of being overthrown by rebellious social forces. Hence, it is critical that they have systematic networks of surveillance over societal leaders and élites who are deemed influential, popular or potentially anti-regime. In China, the PPCC's carefully designed political activities enable the Party-state to keep a constant eye on the most influential social leaders and proactively monitor their ideological orientation, political loyalty and material needs. Not only are these activities used by the Party-state as a means of political education but, more importantly, they provide a closely monitored forum where selected local élites and social leaders can express their opinions, allowing the Party-state to scrutinize these opinions and follow up with action whenever necessary. To achieve co-optation, "politicians attract a winning coalition and retain its support by distributing things of value".[84] The PPCC is also an effective channel through which the Party-state dispenses spoils, rents, privileges and protection to influential members of society. The Party-state relies heavily on the PPCC to create patron–client networks, allocate preferential treatment and consolidate its ties with élites and leaders in society.

In addition, the PPCC garners reliable societal feedback on governance. Governments need such feedback to make, modify and implement public policy and maintain political stability. Democratic governments obtain such feedback through open elections, the free press, independent civil society and citizen activism. However, none of these exist under authoritarian rule. This lack of authentic sources of political information is an intrinsic defect that makes authoritarian regimes

---

[83] "Zhengxie Z xian weiyuanhui guanyu zhengxie jiguan gongzuo zhidu de jixiang guiding" (Several Draft Regulations on the Working Procedures of the Z County PPCC), *Archival Document 3-06* (9 July 1984).

[84] Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, James D. Morrow, Randolph M. Siverson and Alastair Smith, "Policy Failure and Political Survival: The Contribution of Political Institutions", *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (April 1999), pp. 147-61.

vulnerable in cases of misgovernance or natural disaster. Hence, authoritarian regimes are also in constant need of controllable, non-electoral yet reliable channels for obtaining political information. In China, members of the PPCC include economic, social and political élites who possess a wide range of expertise, but are relatively independent from the Party-state's rank-and-file control. Due to the absence of genuine elections and a free press, the Communist state has to rely on pseudo-consultative bodies—such as the PPCC—to obtain relatively authentic feedback on governance, monitor the level of regime support, identify damaging problems and improve the overall quality of public service. Nevertheless, it is difficult to say that the PPCC in its present form possesses any "democratic" potential in the sense of "doing what the people want". Ultimately, the PPCC is a creation of the Party and a tool for the Party to strengthen its grip over society. Its involvement in policy-making is highly submissive and marginal, compared to the Party-state. The PPCC's role in providing information and advice is not likely to be expanded into substantial participation in policy-making in the foreseeable future.

The PPCC also serves as a privileged forum for policy bargaining and a means of controlled political participation for selected members of society. Authoritarian regimes need to maintain a "supporting selectorate" by dispensing privileged access to political power. By granting participatory access to a tiny portion of society and tolerating limited levels of policy negotiation through the PPCC, the regime strives to forge a sense of identification with the ruling *nomenklatura* among non-Communist élites and societal leaders and to imbue a "healthy" dose of representation in its otherwise closed, rigid and secretive policy mechanisms. More importantly, despite the rejection of genuine electoral competition, authoritarian regimes still need an array of participatory institutions to legitimize their claim to power and to embellish their heavy-handed rule—as long as these participatory channels are controllable, non-substantial[85] and insulated from the majority of the population. Available only to a select group of members from crucial social sectors, the PPCC has provided the Chinese Party-state with a highly restricted yet effective channel for political participation. The regime benefits from both the façade of consultative decision-making and the inclusion of alternative inputs from local élites and societal leaders in its otherwise arbitrary and at times coercive policy-making and implementation processes.

Posited as the middle ground between the Party and the state, the PPCC is supplementary to the more formal and constitutionally designated political institutions, such as the People's Congress (PC). In the official language, the PPCC and the PC are always mentioned in parallel as "the two meetings" (*lianghui* 两会); nevertheless, the two institutions have significant differences. The representatives of the PC are produced by a nominal election, while the members of the PPCC are usually handpicked by the Party from among the non-Communist élites and societal leaders. With regard to functionality, the PC is

[85] Non-substantial participation signifies participation, but without any real decision-making power over policy and restricted to issues approved by the authority.

equipped with legislative authority, while the PPCC is a consultative body without any legal power in decision-making. Regarding membership, the Communist Party needs to have an overwhelming majority in the PC to control legislative power, but intentionally keeps itself as minority in the PPCC. Hence, as a representative institution with a role in regime inclusion, the PC has less institutional flexibility and relatively limited room for political manipulation of the Party-state. In Z County, the PC usually bestows upon the decision-making process its procedural legitimacy, while the PPCC serves as a more direct form of political participation and consultation. A unique Chinese inclusive regime institution, the PPCC's essential role in assisting the ruling Party-state to build, consolidate and retain political support and to prolong the longevity of the system should not be overlooked.

degrees in Asian and Chinese studies and a PhD in Agricultural Economics, and has conducted numerous fieldwork-intensive and collaborative projects on agricultural and rural development, and on institutional and policy reform in China.

Felix Wemheuer is Assistant Professor at the Institute for East Asian Studies/ Sinology at the University of Vienna in Austria. He has published articles on the Great Leap Famine in academic journals such as *The China Quarterly*, and a popular biography of Mao Zedong in German. From 2008 to 2010, he was a visiting scholar at the Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies, Harvard University. In 2011, his co-edited volume, *Eating Bitterness: New Perspectives on the Great Leap Forward and Famine*, was published with UBC Press. Currently, he is working on *Hunger and Food Politics in Maoist China and the Soviet Union*.

T. E. Woronov is a lecturer in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Sydney. Her research interests focus on how China's rapidly changing cities produce new opportunities for—and new constraints and limitations on—the nation's children and youth.

Ka-ming Wu is Assistant Professor in the Department of Applied Social Sciences, Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

YAN Xiaojun is Assistant Professor of Politics and Public Administration at the University of Hong Kong. He received his PhD in Political Science from the Government Department at Harvard University in 2009. Before that, he studied international politics at Peking University. He is a comparative political scientist with special expertise in the politics of China. His research interests revolve around political development, authoritarianism, democratization, local government, contentious politics, comparative historical study of revolution, and the Chinese reforms.