

# Establishing Grassroots Democracy in Contemporary China

*Edited by* Chen Yiping & Xu Lixiang



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## Preface

On July 4th, 1945, in an ordinary cave in Yan'an, Shaanxi Province in the north of China, Mao Zedong, 53 years old, and Huang Yanpei, 67 years old, held the famous "Yan'an Dialogue". Huang Yanpei was a renowned Chinese patriot and a democratic educator, who was visiting Yan'an in the capacity of a councillor to the Nationalist Council. Huang Yanpei asked, "In over sixty years of my life, based on what I have seen with my own eyes, not to mention what I have heard, I feel that 'the rise can be prosperous', and yet 'the demise can be quick'; from an individual, to a family, a group, a region and even to a nation, many have failed to break away from the manipulation of such a cycle." This is a question about how to avoid falling into the vicious cycle of alternate periods of "chaos" and "order" as evidenced by the rise and demise of dynasties in the history of China. Mao Zedong lit a cigarette, pondered for a while, and answered with resolution, "We have found a new path to get out of this cycle. This new path is democracy. Only by letting the people supervise the government, will the government stay on alert. Only when everyone starts to be responsible, shall we not die out in our governance."

During the Chinese revolution and the period of peaceful socialist construction after the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Chinese Communist Party led the Chinese people to diligently pursue democracy and progress. At present, the heroic practices of the Chinese people have shown that



democracy is the lifeline of socialism, and the pursuit of more realistic and developed democracy should be an unswerving cause for the Chinese people.

How to develop and achieve more realistic and developed democracy? In 1987, the then Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress in China Peng Zhen pointed out that "how to make sure that the one billion people exercise democratic rights and become masters of the country, this is a big fundamental question. I think basically there are two aspects: on one hand, the one billion people can form National People's Congress and local people's congresses at various levels consisting of their elected representatives to exercise the power to manage the country. On the other hand, mass self-governance should be implemented at the grassroots, whereby the masses shall themselves handle their own affairs according to law so as to enable the masses themselves to exercise democratic rights." From this, it is not hard for us to realize that grassroots democracy is considered by the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese government as one of the important forms to achieve democratic development in China.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, especially with the democratic political practices and explorations since the inception of reform and opening, contemporary China has already formulated a "four-in-one" strategy for democratic political development consisting of the system for people's congresses, the system for multi-party cooperation and political consultation under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, the system for regional autonomy for ethnic minorities and the system for grassroots mass self-governance. Grassroots democracy has become a foundational project in this development strategy. Grassroots democracy has also become a unique perspective and lens to observe China's democratic development.

In contemporary China, the system for villager self-governance in rural areas, the system for resident self-governance in cities and the system for democratic management in enterprises



and public institutions based on workers' congress have constituted the basic forms of grassroots democratic political practices. As the most extensive democratic practice in contemporary China, grassroots democracy has fully embodied the basic principle of people being masters of the country, and created diverse forms of democracy, thus exerting an enormous impact on the construction, development and improvement of democratic politics in contemporary China.

As early as the first half of the 20th century during the period of China's New Democratic Revolution, while governing only the revolutionary bases and liberated areas, the Chinese Communist Party had already aimed at national independence and liberation of the people, closely relied on the broad masses of workers and peasants, established the principle for developing grassroots democracy, explored and started to implement the forms for grassroots democratic political development. In 1940, Mao Zedong clearly realized that "China mainly lacks two things: one is independence, the other is democracy. The absence of either of the two will make it impossible for China to achieve its goals. Back then at the revolutionary bases and liberated areas, due to the low level of democratic qualities and democratic capabilities of the people, electoral voting methods such as "red and green ballots", "bean selection", "circle drawing", "incense burning" and "casting of paper balls" were created to stimulate the enthusiasm of the masses of people to participate in politics, and enable the masses of people to realize the benefits of being masters of the country. At the initial stage after the founding of People's Republic of China, grassroots democratic political development became an important measure for the Chinese Communist Party to lead the masses of people to establish and consolidate the newborn regime of the people and build socialism. Back then in the vast rural areas, peasants were mobilized and motivated to conduct land reform and carry out grassroots government construction; in factories, workers were mobilized to conduct reforms for the democratiza-



tion of factories, mines and enterprises, established factory management committee and workers' meeting, and were widely engaged in factory management; in urban residential areas, mass self-governance organization – resident committee – was universally established. Since the inception of reform and opening up, the *Constitution of the People's Republic of China* passed in the 5th Session of the 5th National People's Congress in 1982 confirmed in the form of fundamental national law that “resident committees or villager committees established in cities and villages based on people's residential areas are grassroots mass self-governance organizations. Directors, deputy directors and members of resident committees and villager committees shall be elected by the people.” Also, “state-owned enterprises shall conduct democratic management by means of workers' congress and other forms according to legal stipulations.” After that, the National People's Congress and its Standing Committee consecutively made laws and regulations such as the *Organic Law for Villager Committee of the People's Republic of China*, the *Organic Law for Resident Committee of the People's Republic of China* and *Law for Industrial Enterprises of Public Ownership of the People's Republic of China*; the General Office of the Party Central Committee, the General Office of the State Council and the National Ministry of Civil Affairs also consecutively issued policies and measures for grassroots democratic political development concerning village affairs publicity, democratic management, village committee reelection, and community construction, making the development of China's grassroots democratic politics more standardized, institutionalized and legislated. In today's China, grassroots democratic politics based on grassroots mass self-governance is rapidly developing, with extensive coverage, enormous participation and diverse democratic forms, showcasing a series of magnificent and vivid scenarios of democratic practices.

The 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party held in November of 2012 clearly proposed that “the im-



plementation of self-management, self-service, self-education and self-supervision in urban and rural community governance, grassroots public affairs and public interests is an important means for the people to directly exercise democratic rights according to law.” The *Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Some Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Deepening the Reform* passed in the 3rd Plenary Session of the 18th Party Congress held in November of 2013 emphasized the need to develop grassroots democracy, clear democratic channels, and improve mechanisms such as grassroots election, consultation, publicity, work report and accountability. On September 5th, 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping reiterated at the meeting to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the founding of the National People’s Congress that “we should stick to and improve grassroots mass self-governance system, develop grassroots democracy, enable the people to directly exercise democratic rights according to law, and effectively prevent the appearance of the phenomenon that people have rights in theory, but no rights in practice.” The *Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Some Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Promoting the Rule of Law in the Country* passed in the 4th Plenary Session of the 18th Party Congress held in October of 2014 proposed again from the high ground of governing the country by law to improve and develop grassroots democratic system, promote grassroots democracy and professional self-discipline according to law, and implement self-management, self-service, self-education and self-supervision. All of these have pointed the direction for the development of China’s grassroots democratic politics in the new era. As the most extensive practice of democracy in China, grassroots democracy has already become an important entry point for the improvement of China’s democratic system and the diversification of democratic forms, constituting the most lively and dynamic component in China’s democratic politics, and representing an important strategic step in exploring the development of



democratic politics with Chinese characteristics.

China has made significant achievements in grassroots democratic political development, which has been witnessed by all with eyes to see. Of course, China also faces some problems and challenges in grassroots democratic political development. How to organically integrate the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, the principle of people being masters of the country and the rule of law in the country, how to clarify the relationship between administrative rights and self-governance rights, and how to boost consciousness and participatory capabilities of grassroots masses for democratic self-governance all need further explorations. This book tries to make a basic summary of the substance, forms and types of grassroots democratic politics with Chinese characteristics based on the general principles for democratic politics during the development of human society and on China's national situation, present a systematic review of the development history and experiences of grassroots democratic politics with Chinese characteristics, conduct an in-depth analysis of the development objectives and approaches of grassroots democratic politics with Chinese characteristics, offer an objective examination of existing problems and challenges in the development of grassroots democratic politics with Chinese characteristics, and then explore how to further orderly promote and expand grassroots democracy in contemporary China, so as to provide a response to the concern raised by the wide readership both at home and abroad for the construction and development of grassroots democratic politics in China.

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# *Chapter One*

## Grassroots Democracy with Chinese Characteristics: Images and Focuses



Since the adoption of reform and opening up policy, China has made tremendous achievements in economic development, winning world-wide acclaim. Meanwhile, grassroots democracy in contemporary China has been in progress and developing. Grassroots democracy in contemporary China refers to the institutional development and practices undertaken by the broad masses of people in grassroots politics, economy and social affairs to directly exercise their democratic rights as masters of the country, emerging from which are classic cases such as *Hai Xuan*, Case Analysis, Five-Segmented Seal, Factory Affairs Publicity, Community Affairs Supervision Committee, Resident Talk, Union Rights Protection Socialization and Community Governance Reform, representing rich and lively attempts, exploration and innovation in democratic practices in line with China's national situation. This chapter begins with true stories and concrete data, offering a graphic presentation of those cases, and then further demonstrates the developments in contemporary China's grassroots democracy based on summaries and analyses of typical cases, revealing the development areas and basic features of grassroots democracy with Chinese characteristics.

## I Image Presentation

Democratic election, democratic decision-making, democratic management and democratic supervision constitute the basic substance of China's grassroots democratic politics, which are universally practiced in cities, villages and many enterprises and public institutions. As China is a big developing country with significant regional differences in economic, political, social and cultural development, each region has created a variety of forms for the practice of grassroots democratic election, democratic decision-making, democratic management and democratic supervision such as *Hai Xuan* for village cadres, Case Analysis, and Five-Segmented Seal.