

Where Is the Deliberative Turn Going? A Survey Study of the Impacts of Public Consultation and Deliberation in China

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Deliberation researchers have started to question the commonly assumed association between democracy and deliberation, arguing that public deliberation in authoritarian states is not only theoretically possible, but also empirically existent. Echoing their speculation that deliberation may lead China to different political trajectories, this study examines the political impacts of authoritarian consultation and deliberation by analyzing data from sample surveys conducted in multiple rural areas in Zhejiang province. The results show that both individuals' discursive experience and the level of discursive institutionalization have positive impacts on state legitimacy, and that deliberation tends to exert a stronger influence on promoting state legitimacy in an area with less fully developed discursive institutions. In contrast, individuals' discursive experience and institutional levels play far weaker roles in fostering citizenship characteristics. The implications of the findings for China's political future are discussed.

Keywords: authoritarian deliberation, consultation, state legitimacy, citizenship, China

Deliberative democrats conceive that public talking improves policy legitimacy and overall accountability of the democratic systems (Gutmann & Thompson 2004). Authoritarian regimes, in contrast, are generally considered uncongenial to political deliberation. Yet mixed modes of governance have been observed in Chinese politics, ranging from typical command authoritarianism to more talk-centric consultative and deliberative authoritarianism (He & Thogersen, 2010; He & Warren, 2011).

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been increasingly deepening what it calls *xieshang minzhu*, translated interchangeably as deliberative democracy or consultative democracy, such that He and Warren argue that China has been taking a deliberative turn in its political development, even as the authoritarian rule is continuously tightening (He & Warren, 2011, 2017). Indeed, over the past few years,

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a collection of central directives issued by the Party Central Committee placed a strong emphasis on strengthening the "socialist consultative democracy," as evidenced by the development of various "input institutions" (Nathan, 2003), to increase limited citizen participatory channels in local governance. The functioning of discursive participation avenues within an authoritarian system seems to challenge the common association between democratic polity and deliberative practice. This combination of authoritarian rule and deliberative influence has produced a noteworthy anomaly beyond the conventional conception of democratic deliberation, which He (2006b) calls "authoritarian deliberation."

If deliberation could serve as a legitimizing tool and a transformative power in Western societies (Dryzek, 2000), will it be able to fulfill the same promise in authoritarian systems? What impacts could discursive practice exert on the state and its citizens in China? Through what avenues could deliberation exert the impacts? What implications could we draw concerning China's political future? These are among the questions this study attempts to address.

To answer these questions, I analyzed data from surveys conducted in the rural areas of Zhejiang province. I took particular advantage of the uneven progress in grassroots deliberative institutionalization so that we could differentiate effects due to personal experience from those that systemic policy interventions might incur. Further, by moving beyond the scope of a few case studies, this study aims to enrich our empirical knowledge of the practice and effects of authoritarian consultation and deliberation in more generalized terms.

I begin by drawing on the concept of authoritarian deliberation, coupled with a more contextualized discussion of the developments of discursive politics in China. Then, I focus on the impacts of authoritarian deliberation and propose my research questions and hypotheses. Next, I introduce the surveys conducted in different rural areas of Zhejiang. Finally, I discuss the implications of the findings in relation to the developmental logic of authoritarian deliberation in China.

Public Consultation and Deliberation in China

Deliberative democrats have faith in the communicative power of public talking. Setting aside the varying emphasis in defining deliberation (Burkhalter, Gastil, & Kelshaw, 2002; Gastil & Black, 2008; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Kim & Kim, 2008), almost all conceptions presume that deliberation is inherently democratic. This symbiotic relationship between democracy and deliberation, according to He (2006b), is problematizable. Although deliberation and democracy are structurally contingent, they each refer to distinct phenomena. While deliberation is a mode of communication, democracy is a form of governance that typically involves including citizens in public issues through distributions of empowerments such as votes and rights (He & Warren, 2011). The distinction between the two concepts makes the idea of authoritarian deliberation theoretically possible.

Adopting He and Warren's (2011) Parsonian conception, deliberation is understood as any act of communication that motivates others through persuasion without a quid pro quo (p. 272). By taking a broad perspective, I place the concept of "deliberation" in the more general context of citizen "discursive engagement," a point I shall come back to discuss further in the later text. The primary form of practice I

am concerned with is discourse with others—the sustained process of citizens meeting, discussing, persuading, and debating with each other about issues of public concern. When other forms of political participation are highly restricted, public talking allows for greater space for citizen input into Chinese politics.

Indeed, discursive participation channels have been incorporated into the political framework to varying degrees across China. Especially in rural areas, research suggests a lack of equality about the village-level penetration of discursive institutions (Tsai, 2007). Although broad data are not available, Wenling, a county-level city in Zhejiang province, is one of the areas that shows a wide array of indigenous policy interventions that have institutionalized deliberative practices quite impressively, and hence attracts the most attention from academics and practitioners who are interested in deliberative democratic reform in China.

As early as the late 1990s, multiple townships and villages in Wenling started to resort to democratic heart-to-heart discussion meetings (*minzhu kentanhui*) to engage residents in the process of local governance. According to He (2014b), between 1996 and 2000, Wenling held at least 1,190 deliberative and consultative meetings. In 2004, a law was put in place in Wenling to regularize deliberative institutions so that residents could demand local officials to hold a deliberative meeting (He, 2006a). In the same year, Wenling was awarded the National Prize for Innovations and Excellence in Local Chinese Governance due to its integration of deliberative measures into the governing system. In 2005, Wenling introduced China's first participatory budget reform, allowing residents to be involved in deliberating over local budget issues. Since 2010, participatory budget deliberative forums have been implemented city wide (Chen, 2012).

Other than these indigenous inventions, there are more widely exercised discursive devices across the country, such as public hearings, consultation meetings, citizen evaluation meetings, and village meetings or village representative assemblies. National law stipulates that all public policies must go through a consultative process before being implemented (He, 2006a). There is no doubt that different interventions display different forms and feature varying degrees of deliberativeness. Some interventions involve more inclusive and representative participants than others. Some meetings may last for a longer period, handling a complex set of public issues, whereas others may not. Still, some deliberative measures can produce decisions that are legally binding by being connected to the local People's Congress, while most of the rest are more consultative.

Some researchers argue that current discursive procedures are mostly consultative in nature and far from fully deliberative, many of them becoming "flower vases" that have been strategically employed by the regime to stem off pressure on governance such that they have little real impact on policies (Truex, 2017). Yet other scholars contend that while consultation and deliberation involve conceptually distinct processes, the former often blends into the latter in China. More importantly, many discursive practices follow deliberative norms and procedural rules and have a direct impact on decision making (He & Warren, 2011, p. 274). Clearly, the discursive practice by Chinese citizens exhibits deliberative tendencies, but is marked by areas of ambiguity that defy sweeping characterizations. Such ambiguity reflects the complexity of present-day discursive participation in China. On the one hand, it entails great challenge in practice to distinguish purely deliberative process from consultation in an authoritarian system; on the other hand, it

might be more important to investigate the impacts of grassroots discursive practices, whether deliberative or consultative.

Embracing the broad conceptualization of deliberation beyond a uniform characterization as either deliberative or nondeliberative, I emphasize the discursive nature of citizen engagement by being open to an indistinct empirical boundary between on-the-ground authoritarian deliberation and consultation, while subsuming both of them in *citizen discursive experience*. Specifically, my analysis will focus on assessing the consequences of having experience with a combination of formal and informal discursive processes in rural China, such as attending the village (representative) assemblies² and consulting with local government officials about important public issues.

In view of China's consultative and deliberative developments, He and Warren (2011) speculate a duality thesis that authoritarian deliberation can entail two possible trajectories for China's political future. One possibility is that, in the short term, public deliberation will build toward a more entrenched authoritarian establishment, forging a deliberative authoritarianism. Meanwhile, once deliberation is practiced, it carries its own logic of democratic transformation, which will incrementally lead to the "deliberation-led democratization" in the long term. Keeping this theorization in mind, what tangible influence has public deliberation exerted on the general public after more than 20 years of deliberative institutionalization in China? This is the question I shall turn to next.

Political Consequences of Authoritarian Consultation and Deliberation

The impacts of deliberation in Chinese context have been most often studied within the setting of a specific discursive session, focusing on participants' postdiscussion shifts in opinion. Among them, numerous case studies were conducted in various townships or villages in Wenling city. A case in point is the series of deliberative polls (DPs) on local budget implemented in Zeguo township of Wenling between 2005 and 2008. Participants were found to shift their policy preferences toward a more informed and public-spirited direction, irrespective of others' statuses or tendencies (Fishkin, He, Luskin, & Su, 2010). To localize the DP technique, in recent years, Chinese practitioners and researchers in Yunnan, Guangdong, and many other places have experimented with various modified versions of DPs using different representation mechanisms (He, 2015, 2018).

Although the findings are encouraging, there are at least two limitations for this line of research. First, deliberative polling is experimental in nature, yet few local governments have either the willingness or the access to the resources to enable them to experiment with it. So far, countable numbers of DPs have been implemented despite an expanding scope. Therefore, the empirical evidence has almost all resulted from recourse to illustrative anecdotes.

² There is a well-established tradition of taking participation in face-to-face group discussions as a quintessential form of public deliberation. Jacobs and associates (2009), for example, used survey respondents' recollections of their recent attendance to a formal or informal public meeting as their measure of face-to-face deliberation.

Related to this point, existing research on consultative and deliberative impacts in China has focused on a narrow range of consequences. The outcomes in the DP setting have revolved around policy-specific attitudes, preferences, and knowledge. But research based in the Western societies apparently shows that deliberation could result in widespread attitudinal and behavioral changes, in both the short and long terms (Pincock, 2012). For instance, face-to-face deliberation experience could help individuals not only build stronger political self-confidence (Morrell, 2005) and develop greater political interest (Gastil, Deess, Weiser, & Simmons, 2010) but also spark more news use and active involvement in political talks and civic engagement (Knobloch & Gastil, 2015) as well as higher levels of electoral participation (Jacobs, Cook, & Delli Carpini, 2009). Empirical research suggests that (successful) public deliberation could indeed perpetuate itself and foster modern democratic citizens. This research also seems to buttress deliberative democrats' optimism in the long-term potential of deliberation to empower Chinese citizens and eventually to promote a deliberation-led democratization in China.

Beyond the commonly observed transformative power of deliberation, it stands to reason that more context-unique influence of public consultation and deliberation exists in an authoritarian state. Even with the same outcomes, they could carry different meanings in varying political contexts. In Western democracies, deliberation has often been found to serve a legitimizing function. For example, discursive participation was found to be positively related to higher levels of trust in government (Jacobs et al., 2009) and power holders (Gastil et al., 2010). Formal deliberation experience, on average, also plays a positive role in increasing citizens' faith in political process (Knobloch & Gastil, 2015). In a democracy, heightened trust and confidence in the political system could enhance collective solidarity and social cohesion; however, in an authoritarian state, although discursive practices may promote government accountability and responsiveness and deepen the linkage between the ruling and the ruled (He, 2006a), all such impacts on enhancing governability may be eventually transformed into increased state legitimacy, reinforcing a powerful state and authoritarianism at large.

In sum, echoing the duality thesis that deliberation may point to two directions of political consequence in China, I hypothesize that authoritarian discursive experience would extend to both increased government legitimacy and citizenship characteristics. More specifically, regarding government legitimacy, having experience in consultative and deliberative practices would enhance individuals' levels of political trust and evaluations of the existing political system in multiple respects (H1). Meanwhile, discursive experience is also expected to strengthen a range of citizenship characteristics, including individuals' political interest, self-political confidence, news use, involvement in political talk, civic engagement, and local electoral participation (H2).

Institutional Influence on Authoritarian Consultation and Deliberation

I tested the aforementioned predictions by drawing on the survey data collected by a research team from Nankai University. In 2010, 2013, and 2014, multiple surveys were implemented in Wenling and Yueqing, two county-level neighboring cities with highly vibrant private economies in Zhejiang. At the time the data were collected, both Wenling and Yueqing had been ranked for years among the top 10 counties with the largest GDP in Zhejiang. By that time, Wenling had 11 townships and five neighborhoods, composed of 830 villages and 97 residential committees; Yueqing contained nine townships and eight neighborhoods

that together consisted of 911 villages and 98 residential committees. Their respective registered populations were more than 1.21 and 1.28 million, with about 90% of each being engaged in agriculture. The annual average per capita income of the rural population was roughly RMB 21,786 and 22,668 in the two areas. They were also comparable about levels of educational infrastructure, both reaching a more than 99% completion rate for the nine-year compulsory education.

One noticeable difference between them, however, lies in the development of discursive institutions. As introduced earlier, Wenling has been the field site for a great number of interventions, such as experiments with DPs and indigenous policies promoting consultative and deliberative practices, that have made it stand out with respect to deliberative institutionalization within Zhejiang and the country at large. In comparison, beyond the basic consultative and deliberative measures stipulated by the national laws, no particular discursive institutions were incorporated in Yueqing's local governance. In that regard, Yueqing typifies an average governance model in rural China and serves as a good comparison group. Taken together, Wenling and Yueqing are akin in almost all aspects, but differ in the levels of discursive institutionalization.

We should recognize that public deliberation tends to follow the law of political empowerment in that the more we move down to the village or local level, the more influence participants tend to have on decision making (He, 2015) beyond the institutional impact. In this study, the impact of locality level on citizen empowerment has been controlled, as the samples were all drawn at the village level. Hence, we might use the two places as a proxy solely for the degree of institutionalization and focus on its influence in grassroots discursive engagement.

I contend that the level of discursive institutionalization constitutes an important element of the local political framework that could instill public recognition, acceptance, and perhaps confidence in deliberation as a means of managing public issues. In the long run, the extent to which consultation and deliberation has been integrated into local politics may affect how the government and public understand themselves as political actors, their roles in governance, and their relationship with each other, all of which may collectively alter the wide political culture and social fabric. I take the view that individual practices have been shaping and shaped by the macrocosm in which their practices are embedded. In the current context, the degree to which discursive institutions have taken root may in turn influence individuals' personal experience, augmenting or attenuating its actual impacts. On this, existing research has not pointed to a clear direction. Therefore, I pose the following research questions:

RQ1: What impacts does the level of discursive institutionalization (proxied by locality) have on the aforementioned aspects of government legitimacy and citizenship characteristics?

RQ2: Does the level of discursive institutionalization (proxied by locality) moderate the impacts of individuals' discursive experience on all of these aspects?

Method

The data in this study were extracted from the larger Deliberative Democracy and Electoral Democracy survey project conducted by a research team at Nankai University. This study focuses on the portion related to deliberative practices in Wenling and Yueqing in Zhejiang province. In view of budget limitations and the feasibility of securing approvals of local authorities, the research team adopted nonprobability sampling mechanisms. They first selected two to three townships in each city based on geographical location, social security, and similar factors. Next, they chose another two to three of the most populous villages in each township and distributed one questionnaire to each household within those villages. The overall response rate was 50%. The pooled data set contained 1,079 complete interviews. After weighting the data based on local census, the final sample size was 1,097, including 615 from Wenling and 482 from Yueqing. Comparisons between the two subsamples showed resemblance on all the major sociodemographics, including age, gender, and SES.

The surveys were administered by face-to-face interviews that took from 20 to 90 minutes each, with more than half being completed around 30 minutes. Some noticeable problems of response bias in survey research in China and other transitional societies have been previously discussed. For example, respondents may not believe that their anonymity is protected, and the experience most respondents had with surveys was with official investigations (Manion, 1994). To minimize the response bias issue, the researchers implemented a set of measures. First, a group of undergraduate and graduate survey workers who had received systematic trainings on survey methodologies conducted all of the interviews. Second, the researchers traveled with the interviewers to the countryside and were on site during the data collection process to supervise the survey administration and provide the students with guidance and clarifications. At the end of each day, the researchers met with the interviewers to discuss any problems arising in the field and to check through the questionnaires. Third, interviewers were able to stress the purely academic nature of the survey to villagers. Indeed, respondents took the survey with the absence of the village cadre, with assurance that their participation was on a fully anonymous, autonomous, and voluntary basis. Finally, the interviewers were trained to make observations of the respondents and to assess likely response biases at the end of each interview. Their assessment on a 4-point scale indicated that more than 95% of respondents were serious about taking the survey ($M = 3.52$, $SD = .60$) and more than 94% of the questionnaires were reliable ($M = 3.42$, $SD = .61$).³ These observations echoed respondents' self-assessment: Respondents of both cities reported a fairly high level of truthfulness of their responses ($M = 4.42$, $SD = .67$; $M = 4.43$, $SD = .64$, respectively) and a minimum degree of apprehension when taking the survey ($M = 1.69$, $SD = .75$; $M = 1.78$, $SD = .75$, respectively). Having taken all these steps and drawing on their stock of local knowledge, the researchers were confident about the data quality.

³ Excluding the less than 5% of respondents who were rated as less serious about taking the survey did not alter the results. Here, I report the results based on the full sample, including all those with complete responses.

Independent Variables

Discursive Experience

Respondents were asked to focus on their consultative and deliberative experience by recalling (a) "How often does the village committee hold village (representative) meetings to discuss important village issues with villagers, such as land appropriation and road construction?" (1 = *never*, 4 = *almost always*); (b) "How often do you participate in village (representative) meetings?" (1 = *never*, 4 = *almost always*); (c) "To what extent does the local township government pay regard to villagers' opinions about important village issues?" (1 = *pays no regard*, 4 = *pays a lot of regard*); and (d) "In dealing with village issues, how often does the township government consult with the villagers?" (1 = *never*, 4 = *almost always*). These questions touch on some of the most regularized discursive practices in rural areas that one might expect to come closer to the formal definitions of authoritarian consultation and deliberation.⁴ The average of these items was taken to form the discursive experience index ($M = 2.06$, $SD = .77$, $\alpha = .74$).

Institutional Level

Wenling and Yueqing were intentionally selected as the field sites because of their overall resemblance on the one hand, and their sharp difference in the degree of deliberative interventions on the other. Therefore, the two localities were taken as a proxy for political frameworks with differing levels of discursive institutionalization, with Wenling being more advanced and Yueqing more rudimentary.

Dependent Variables

Political Trust

Respondents were first asked to rate how much trust they had in five levels of party committees and government branches—the center, province, county, township, and village—on a 4-point scale (1 = *none at all*, 4 = *very much trust*). Consistent with the accumulated research on Chinese political trust, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) produced a two-factor solution. First, trust in county- and township-level party committee/government, local village committee, court, police, and township deputies to the People's

⁴ It is worth noting that in China there is a severe lack of infrastructure of civil society organizations that play a strong role in facilitating civic dialogues, as in their Western counterparts. Village (representative) assembly constitutes one of the few institutionally sanctioned consultative and deliberative venues in the rural areas. Certainly, there are drawbacks to these measures on discursive experience: The meeting attended may have been riddled with personal attacks and shouting matches, and respondents' recall may be inaccurate. With regard to possibly highlighting uncommon discursive experience, this may occur for individual respondents, but there are no grounds for expecting this to hold for the full range of experiences across respondents. Moreover, early case studies suggested that quarrels in a DP are not unusual, but they may actually serve to improve villagers' issue understanding and cultivate deliberative citizenship (He, 2018). Taken together, the bias introduced by potentially less than deliberative experience should be less serious than one might expect.

Congress loaded on a trust in local government factor; and trust in provincial and central party committee/government, and the military loaded on a trust in central government factor. Subsequent analyses are based on indices of the two constructs by averaging across the respective items ($M = 2.59$, $SD = .63$ for trust in local government; $M = 3.16$, $SD = .60$ for trust in central government).⁵ The reliabilities of the two indices thus created are .91 and .83, respectively.

Evaluations of Current System

Respondents evaluated the existing political system along four dimensions. First, they answered seven questions about their evaluations of government performance. Sample questions include, "How convenient is it now to do things with the township government?" (1 = *very inconvenient*, 4 = *very convenient*), and "Compared with 10 years ago, has the government officials' attitude become better?" (1 = *become worse*, 5 = *become much better*). Because these questions used different measures, each item was rescored to a 0- to 1-point scale, and then the average across the rescaled items was taken as the index of satisfaction with government performance ($M = .55$, $SD = .20$, $\alpha = .90$).

Next, respondents were asked, "Overall, are you satisfied with the current state of development of democratic institutions (a) in China and (b) in your township?" (1 = *very unsatisfied*, 4 = *very satisfied*). Averaging the two items yielded the index of satisfaction with the democratic development ($M = 2.62$, $SD = .62$, $\alpha = .73$).

Respondents then evaluated the local electoral system by answering another two questions about whether they thought the voting process of the (a) village committee chair and (b) deputies to the People's Congress fair (1 = *totally unfair*, 4 = *very fair*). The average of the two questions formed the index of perceived fairness of local elections ($M = 2.26$, $SD = .77$, $\alpha = .88$).

Finally, respondents were asked to indicate, based on their feelings, how prevalent corruption was across the aforementioned five levels of government (1 = *hardly any*, 4 = *almost everyone is corrupt*). Averaging across the items created an index of perceived prevalence of corruption ($M = 2.66$, $SD = .70$, $\alpha = .91$).

Citizenship Characteristics

Turning to deliberative impacts on empowering citizens, an empowered citizen may be more interested in public affairs, more attentive to current events, and more active in engaging in discussion with fellow citizens about matters of interest. These three characteristics—political interest, political news use,

⁵ Although the CFA yielded a significant χ^2 statistic, other fit indices showed satisfactory model fit: CFI = .95, RMSEA = .046, RMSR = .04. The distributional patterns and the average levels of political trust followed a clear pattern of "hierarchical trust"—trusting central government more than local government—that political scientists have repeatedly observed in China compared with other Asian societies (Wu & Wilkes, 2017) or Western countries (Christensen & Lægheid, 2005).

and political talk—were each measured by one question: “Are you interested in politics?” (1 = *not interested at all*, 4 = *very interested*; $M = 2.40$, $SD = .81$); “Do you often read or watch news about current events or politics?” (1 = *almost never*, 4 = *almost every day*; $M = 2.85$, $SD = 1.05$); and “Do you often talk to other people about national affairs or political topics?” (1 = *never*, 4 = *very often*; $M = 2.60$, $SD = .87$).

After these questions, individuals’ self-political confidence was measured by asking them to indicate their agreement (1 = *very much agree*, 4 = *very much disagree*) to two statements: “Politics is complicated and hard to understand by people like me,” and “People like me do not have any influence on government’s decisions.” The average of the two items formed the index of internal political efficacy ($M = 2.25$, $SD = .65$, $\alpha = .61$).

Lastly, citizenship behaviors were assessed. First, respondents’ involvement in civic activities was measured by first asking them whether they had participated in any civic groups such as sports clubs, opera clubs, arts groups, and the like (1 = *yes*), followed by the question about how often they participated in their activities if they had ever joined the groups (1 = *never*, 4 = *very often*). Respondents who reported to have never joined any civic groups were assigned the lowest value for the question on frequency of participation. In this way, these two items were taken together to yield the index of civic participation ($M = 1.91$, $SD = 1.10$). Next, the extent to which respondents have engaged in voting was assessed by taking the sum of two items, asking whether they voted (1 = *yes*) in an election of the village committee chair in recent years, and the recent election of deputies to the People’s Congress ($M = .83$, $SD = .72$, $\alpha = .88$).

Covariates

Ten sociodemographic variables that embody one’s material and symbolic resources were included: age; gender; education; being married; household monthly income; party membership; Han ethnicity; and being a farmer, a cadre, or a worker.

Analytic Strategy

I used hierarchical ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to test the predictors of political trust and evaluations of the current system posed in H1 and the research questions. The sociodemographics were entered in the first block. The second block—discursive opportunities—reflects the deposits of consultative and deliberative opportunities that individuals derive from both their personal experience and the broad institutional framework (proxied by locality) in which their experiences are embedded and influenced. To test such relational contingencies, the interaction term between discursive experience and locality was created.

Following the same procedure, another set of OLS regression models was fitted to test the deliberative impacts on citizenship characteristics as hypothesized in H2, except voting. Because voting was measured as a count variable, I used Poisson regression to predict it. In addition, because individuals’ political interest and efficacy may also have a bearing on their behavioral tendencies (Jung, Kim, & de Zúniga, 2011; Xenos & Moy, 2007), in the four models that predicted political news use, political talk, civic participation, and voting, they were included as an additional block—citizenship attitudes.

Results

The analyses of the political impacts of authoritarian deliberation are sequenced. I begin with a descriptive comparison of the distributions of discursive experience within each city before moving on to use regression analyses to explore its potential effects. The results suggested that Wenling's respondents outperformed their Yueqing counterparts on three of four indicators of personal discursive experience, with the only exception being that there was no difference between them on how frequently they participated in village meetings. These results are exactly in line with my contention that higher institutional level implies more structural opportunities that could involve citizens in public consultation and deliberation, even though they might choose to not actually engage in it. Wenling's respondents clearly acknowledged the existence of such discursive institutions. I shall come back to this point when interpreting the joint impact of institutionalization and discursive experience.

Consultative and Deliberative Impacts on State Legitimacy

Table 1 provides a glimpse into the influence of public consultation and deliberation on the various aspects indicative of state legitimacy.

Table 1. Regression Analysis Predicting Political Trust and Evaluations.

	Trust in central govt.	Trust in local govt.	Satisfaction with govt. performance	Satisfaction with democratic development	Fairness of local election	Prevalence of corruption
Sociodemographics						
Age	.21***	.00	-.03	.03	-.01	-.03
Female	-.12***	.06*	.05*	.05	.10***	.01
Education level	-.04	-.07	-.03	-.06	-.12***	.04
Married	-.14***	-.13***	-.06*	-.03	-.13***	.11***
Family annual income	-.04	.00	.01	-.03	.00	.11***
Party membership	-.03	.04	.04	.03	.02	-.04
Han ethnicity	-.04	.04	.03	-.03	.05	.02
Farmer	-.03	.01	-.04	.01	-.00	.01
Cadre	.05	.04	.02	.01	.07*	-.05
Worker	-.04	-.01	-.03	.02	.05	.02
ΔR^2 (%)	11.4***	5.3***	4.7***	2.7***	6.0***	7.8***
Discursive opportunities						
Discursive experience	.21***	.41***	.50***	.41***	.36***	-.28***
Locality (1 = Wenling)	.12	.23**	.22**	.27***	.14	-.18*

Locality × Discursive Experience	-.08	-.20*	-.18*	-.30***	-.11	.05
ΔR^2 (%)	3.4***	11.9***	19.2***	9.2***	10.1***	9.0***
Total R^2	14.8***	17.2***	23.9***	11.9***	16.1***	16.8***

Note. $N = 1,097$. Entries are standardized regression coefficients.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

The first two columns present the hierarchical regression models predicting political trust. In both models, the discursive opportunities block, including the set of variables of our focal interest, explained a considerable amount of the total variance (ΔR^2 varied from 3.4% to 11.9%). After controlling for sociodemographics, discursive experience was the strongest positive predictor of trust in both central and local governments (β varied from .21 to .41, $p < .001$), thus providing initial support for H1.

Meanwhile, RQ1 and RQ2 attempt to examine the impacts of discursive institutionalization, proxied by locality, and its interaction with individuals' discursive experience on affecting state legitimacy. Regarding political trust, Table 1 suggests that respondents based in Wenling tended to report more trust in local government ($\beta = .23$, $p = .002$). Institutional level further moderated the impact of discursive experience on how much individuals trusted the local government ($\beta = -.20$, $p = .024$). To better interpret the interaction effect, I parsed out the influence of discursive experience on local political trust for Wenling and Yueqing respondents separately. While Wenling's respondents increased their trust by .23 units for every one-unit increase in their past experience in public consultation and deliberation ($b = .23$, $SE = .03$, $p < .001$), the effect of discursive experience was even stronger among Yueqing's respondents in increasing their trust in local government, $b = .32$, $SE = .04$, $p < .001$. Figure 1 illustrates this set of interaction effects.

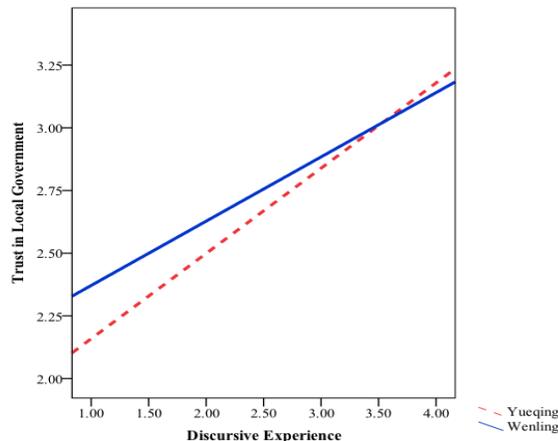


Figure 1. Interaction effect between discursive experience and locality on trust in local government.

Following predicting political trust, Table 1 proceeds in testing the discursive impacts on individuals' evaluations of the existing political system. In these models, we observed an even stronger role played by the discursive opportunities block (ΔR^2 varied from 9% to 19.2%). Regarding specific predictors, we observed some consistent patterns compared with the early tests on political trust. First, after controlling for sociodemographics, individuals' discursive experience was again the most powerful predictor. It was related to greater satisfaction with government performance ($\beta = .50, p < .001$) and the current state of democratic development in China ($\beta = .41, p < .001$); it also had a positive relationship with perceived fairness of local elections ($\beta = .36, p < .001$) but was negatively related to the amount of corruption that respondents perceived ($\beta = -.28, p < .001$). Thus, H1 was fully supported that public consultation and deliberation may forge state legitimacy in a number of aspects among the rural public.

To turn to the effects of institutionalization on political evaluations, Table 1 shows that respondents from Wenling apparently reported higher approvals of their local government ($\beta = .22, p = .003$) and the current state of democracy ($\beta = .27, p < .001$); they were also more likely to agree that corruptions were low ($\beta = -.18, p = .017$). Moreover, as what we saw in the context of political trust, institutional level negatively moderated the effects of discursive experience on people's satisfaction with government performance and the current state of democracy ($\beta = -.18, p = .037, \beta = -.30, p < .001$, respectively).

Although in Wenling, respondents' approval of their local government was increased by .11 units for every one-unit increase in their discursive experience ($b = .11, SE = .01, p < .001$), those from Yueqing became even more happy with their government with one-unit of increase in their engagement in public consultation and deliberation ($b = .13, SE = .01, p < .001$). The contrast in the impacts of discursive experience was even stronger between Wenling and Yueqing regarding people's satisfaction with current democratic development: Wenling's respondents increased their level of satisfaction for .19 units with every one-unit increase in their discursive experience ($b = .19, SE = .03, p < .001$), whereas in Yueqing, one-unit increase in their discursive experience would contribute to increased satisfaction with the current state of democracy as large as .31 units ($SE = .04, p < .001$). Together, personal discursive experience tended to exhibit differential impacts that would be contingent on the level of discursive institutionalization in the local area. Compared with Wenling, discursive experience seemed to have added benefits for increasing individuals' political satisfactions in Yueqing, where the institutional level of discursive mechanisms was relatively low. The patterns of interaction are presented in Figures 2a and 2b.

By far, Table 1 provides initial answers to the research questions, showing that level of institutionalization, at least proxied by geographic locality may exert additional effects beyond those of personal discursive experience on the various aspects showing state legitimacy and also alter the magnitude of impacts of such experience to a considerable extent.

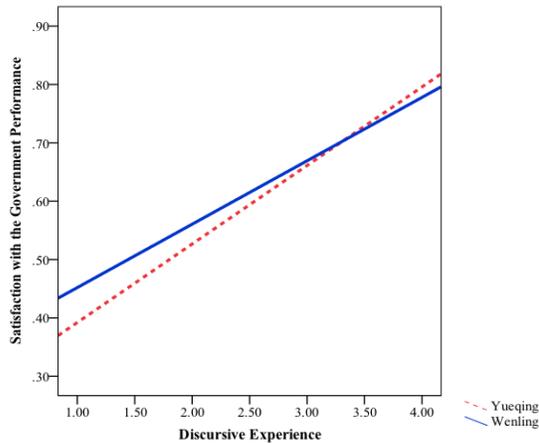


Figure 2a. Interaction effect between discursive experience and locality on satisfaction with government performance.

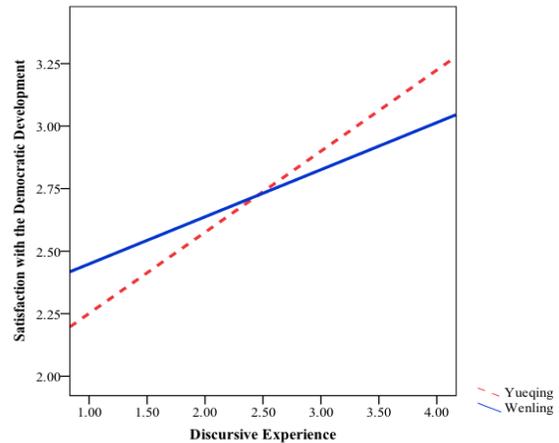


Figure 2b. Interaction effect between discursive experience and locality on satisfaction with democratic development.

Will public consultation and deliberation have a similar bearing on building modern citizens? Or, with enhanced state legitimacy, will its potential impacts on empowering citizens be heavily retarded? Bearing these questions in mind, I now turn to the discursive impacts on fostering democratic citizenship.

Consultative and Deliberative Impacts on Citizenship Characteristics

Based on the literature, and considering China's political realities, this study assesses both citizenship attitudes and behaviors. The attitudinal dimension includes political interest and internal political efficacy; citizenship behaviors consist of news use, engagement in political talk and civic groups, as well as voting in local elections.

In all the models in Table 2, the same variables were included and entered in the same succession as in the earlier regression models.

There were two updates to the models predicting citizenship behaviors. First, besides sociodemographics and the discursive opportunities block, the two citizenship attitudes were entered in a separate block, in the hope that we can reduce their potential for confounding any apparent discursive impacts on our measures of behavioral outcomes. The second difference lay in the approach chosen to model voting. Because voting was measured as a count variable and not overdispersed, Poisson regression was employed. To compare the model fits, following each block, the Wald test chi-squared value was reported, with larger values providing evidence against the smaller model.

Table 2. Regression Analysis Predicting Citizenship Attitudes and Behaviors.

	Political interest ¹	Political efficacy ¹	Political news use ¹	Political talk ¹	Civic participation ¹	Voting ²
Sociodemographics						
Age	.19**	-.13***	.25***	.11***	.05	.01***
Female	-.14***	-.03	-.22***	-.19***	.08**	.03
Education level	.08*	.07	.08*	.14***	.04	-.00
Married	-.01	.09*	.04	.13***	.09	.38***
Family annual income	-.04	.03	.04	.03	.09**	.01
Party membership	.06	.03	.01	.03	.08	.09
Han ethnicity	-.02	.05	-.07*	-.05	.07*	.12
Farmer	-.02	.06	-.02	-.05	-.05	.07
Cadre	.04	.03	-.03	-.01	.04	-.07
Worker	.02	.00	.01	.04	-.04	-.00
ΔR^2 (%)	6.7***	4.5***	16.2***	12.8***	3.9***	-
Wald χ^2 (df = 10)	-	-	-	-	-	78.48***
Citizenship attitudes						
Political interest	-	-	.35***	.38***	.15***	.11**
Political efficacy	-	-	.05	.05	.01	-.13**
ΔR^2 (%)	-	-	12.0***	14.5***	2.4***	-
Wald χ^2 (df = 2)	-	-	-	-	-	10.58**
Discursive opportunities						
Discursive experience	.17***	-.02	.09*	.08	.07	.07
Locality (1 = Wenling)	-.06	-.21*	.18**	.05	-.06	-.04
Locality \times Discursive Experience	.03	.14	-.18*	-.04	-.04	.03
ΔR^2 (%)	2.9***	1.1**	.5*	.4	.8*	-
Wald χ^2 (df = 3)	-	-	-	-	-	3.89
Total R^2	9.6***	5.6***	28.7***	27.7***	7.1***	-
Goodness-of-fit χ^2 (df = 914)	-	-	-	-	-	679.93

¹N = 1,097. Entries are standardized OLS regression coefficients.

²N = 930. Entries are Poisson regression coefficients.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

I started by focusing on the models predicting citizenship attitudes. As shown in the first two columns, although discursive experience tended to increase political interest ($\beta = .17, p < .001$), it did not affect respondents' political self-confidence; H2 was partially supported. Meanwhile, institutional level of discursive mechanisms also had negligible influence on citizenship attitudes. With these findings, we got the first impression that compared with their effects on promoting state legitimacy, both discursive experience and level of institutionalization played a smaller part in affecting citizenship attitudes.

Next, I tested discursive impacts on the various citizenship behaviors on the basis of further controlling for political interest and efficacy. In general, discursive experience and institutional level continued to lack a strong impact on the behavioral dimension of citizenship characteristics. The only behavior that seemed to have been affected by discursive experience was political news use. Specifically, past experience with public consultation and deliberation contributed to greater news use ($\beta = .09, p = .03$); this effect was contingent upon institutional level, which itself also affected the amount of news respondents consumed ($\beta = .18, p = .01$). Compared with Wenling, discursive experience tended to exhibit a stronger positive influence on the amount of political news used by respondents from Yueqing ($\beta = -.18, p = .029$; see Figure 3).

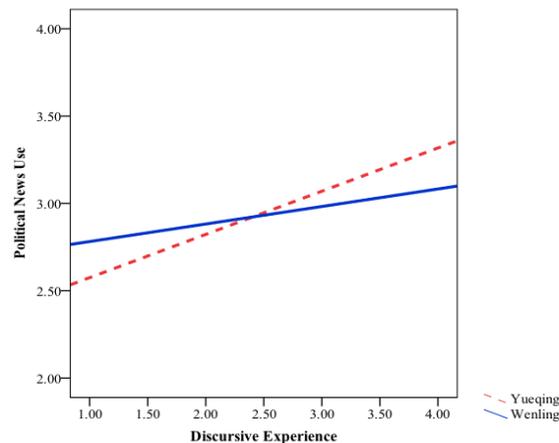


Figure 3. Interaction effect between discursive experience and locality on political news use.

But other than this set of significant effects, neither personal experience nor discursive institutional level appeared to influence any of the other citizenship behaviors. A further look at Table 2 suggests that political interest displayed the most consistent, strong, and positive impact on all the four citizenship behaviors and contributed the most to the model fit other than sociodemographics. Together with the above findings regarding citizenship attitudes, we conclude that authoritarian consultation and deliberation tended to have minor positive effects on a very selective set of citizenship characteristics, lending mixed evidence for H2. The answers to the two research questions also fell short of a consistent pattern when it came to the citizenship outcome variables, attitudinal or behavioral.

Critical Discussion: Revisiting the Developmental Logic of Authoritarian Deliberation

With the impacts of public consultation and deliberation in mind, we now turn again to the duality thesis regarding the developmental logic of authoritarian deliberation and assess how well it has fit our observations. Overall, the findings support He and Warren's (2011) expectation that, in the current stage, deliberation serves as a legitimating resource in China. The stark contrast between the consistent effects on heightening state legitimacy and the apparently weaker influence on cultivating democratic citizens seems to embody a longstanding political philosophy that underpins the deliberative practice in China: The normative goal of authoritarian deliberation, according to He (2014a), has always been to improve governance and enhance authority. For this purpose, the party may strategically give over limited powers in local policy making.

Then, to the extent that citizen discursive engagement is skillfully engineered by the party, we should not assume that deliberative reforms may inevitably alter the characteristics of the state. For example, He and Warren (2011) envisage that the logic of deliberative inclusion would lead to voting (p. 284). Our data do not directly reflect the extent to which voting tends to be resorted to as decision-making rule in public meetings, but they do indicate an irrelevance of discursive engagement with electoral participation.

Meanwhile, the functional effectiveness in heightening citizen political trust and evaluations may also suggest that connecting discursive mechanisms to government could widen the presence and perhaps influence of ordinary citizens. This may feed back into the community, sending out a strong message that the government is responsive and the discursive effort worthwhile such that more citizens might be encouraged to participate in future consultation and deliberation. By inference, He and Warren (2011) are right that deliberative experience would foster citizen expectations of the government to be more responsive and more open to discursive mechanisms, which may facilitate future development of deliberative democracy. Recent research points to the same conclusion that introducing consultative channels may temporarily increase social stability and citizen satisfactions. But accordingly, people raise expectations that cannot be sustained in the long run without introducing new deliberative reforms (Truex, 2017).

Thus, my argument holds that genuinely fostering government responsiveness to consultative and deliberative mechanisms will require institutional guarantees. Taking a comparative perspective, this study suggests that discursive institutional levels matter and play an important role in building state legitimacy. Additionally, levels of discursive institutionalization may further alter the impacts of personal experience. This could be because there are higher chances that discursive mechanisms wrestle with conventional authoritarian command in resolving public issues in a discursively less well-equipped area. Discursive opportunities appear to be more valuable so that people tend to feel more enthusiastic about them whenever such opportunities arise; then, such limited opportunities will play a large part in shifting citizens' attitudes toward the state in a positive direction. Our analysis seems to substantiate this reasoning—respondents in Yueqing beat their Wenling counterparts on how frequently they participated in village meetings; their personal discursive experience, in turn, brought stronger positive influence to bear on promoting state

legitimacy. The interaction between personal experience and institutional level of discursive mechanisms has important implications.

First, the results demonstrate He and Warren's (2011) stipulation that the legitimacy of Chinese government is most likely to be consolidated locale by locale. Behind the process, however, lies a less addressed aspect in their theorization.

The uneven development of consultative and deliberative institutions in Wenling and Yueqing refracts the bigger issue of unequal distribution of discursive resources and infrastructures across areas. Research already shows that structured inequalities exist in civic and political engagement in China (Pan, 2012). Evidence of institutional disparities in public discourse would suggest that the bias in citizen engagement extends to the interactions and relations within communities. This would introduce another layer of unequal voice in Chinese society. Therefore, our interpretations of the functional effectiveness of discursive mechanisms need to be placed in this broader context.

Related to this point, much of the authoritarian deliberation literature has been focused on the institutional level—their innovations, growth patterns, or functional effectiveness in local governance (He, 2006a; He & Wu, 2017). There is a pressing need for studies of participant-level outcomes such as civic attitudes and political sophistication, because the democratic quality of a political system may be enhanced to the extent that the experience of deliberation increases citizen competence (Dryzek, 2009). More broadly, revolving around the idea of deliberative capacity, scholars argue for a new form of deliberative citizenship (He, 2018). According to Stokes (2006), central to deliberative citizenship is the ability of citizens to engage in reflexive communication and dialogue in the spirit of deliberative democracy. Constrained by our data, I was unable to examine this deliberative aspect of citizenship characteristics. Nevertheless, it is important to ask: Is authoritarian consultation and deliberation capable of cultivating a new form of citizenship? Will deliberation-inspired citizen empowerment become an alternative pathway to regime democratization? These questions are now on a research agenda that starts to gain scholarly attention (He, 2018) but remains largely under-explored in the literature and worth long-time pursuit by students of authoritarian deliberation.

Regarding individual level effects, there has been a set of precious case-study-based research on the influence of various deliberative experiments in local governance (e.g., He, 2015, 2018). These political science studies were mostly inspired by the deliberative polling model and typically involved collaborative interventions by the local government and academics in reaction to specific problems.

This study complements the previous research in four important ways. First, it extends the research focus from uniquely localized experimentations to one of the more widely and regularly exercised discursive mechanisms, the village (representative) meeting. It might be argued that our discursive engagement measures indicate the participatory channels that are most readily available to citizens in rural areas. Second, our results extend the scope of effects from policy-specific preferences to average political attitudes, evaluations, and citizenship outcomes. Third, while case study is always desirable for an intensive study of specific deliberative events or venues, for empirical verification of theoretical claims, as this study attempts to achieve, surveys are required (Black et al., 2011). Finally, also thanks to the survey approach, this study

is able to take a modest step in taking into account of heterogeneity across geographic locations of respondents. Despite limited inferential validity due to the nonprobability samples, our conclusion indicates a cross-location variation in not only mean levels of consultative and deliberative engagement but also the effect levels of discursive experience. The latter part is particularly important in that understanding such locale-specific effects of public consultation and deliberation would yield valuable theory-refining insights in how discursive practices and institutions may be incorporated into the social dynamics of a place. Our results thus identify this as a future research direction.

Our conclusion concerning the impacts of authoritarian consultation and deliberation must be qualified by two sets of considerations. First, our observations based on the available survey data are not able to flesh out the process of the consultative and deliberative sessions. Therefore, our conclusions are predicated on a conservative estimate of the deliberative quality of such practices. This is a qualification that may strengthen our interpretation of the findings. Put differently, the real strength of the functional effectiveness of public consultation and deliberation in enhancing state legitimacy and empowering Chinese citizens would be stronger should the discursive practices be more deliberative than what our respondents had experienced. The real deliberative impacts could lie somewhere between the strong effects that may be induced by the well-administered case studies in isolated places and the significant but relatively small effects demonstrated in our survey study as averages among a wider population as a whole.

Second, our results must be interpreted in the context of China's political ecology. The existing research has placed much attention to the localized discursive innovations and did not focus as much on the general sociopolitical milieu. Although the notion of "socialist consultative democracy" seems to have gained influence in CCP's official discourse (He & Warren, 2017), the effective implementation and functioning of the idea in practice will need the continuous presence of some favorable social forces that promote society-wide openness, inclusion, and diversity.

Conclusion

This study joins the endeavor of authoritarian deliberative democrats by examining the political consequences of public consultation and deliberation in China. The results largely support the duality thesis in that, in the current stage, deliberation plays a greater role in reinforcing the authoritarian rule than in promoting citizen empowerment.

The question of whether public consultation and deliberation may drive the authoritarian system toward a more democratic direction or lead to another generation of skillfully crafted talk to manipulate public thinking remains open. It is, however, clear that a deliberative turn in Chinese politics has come; the focus is now on the usage and purpose of deliberation. To instill more democratic elements into deliberation requires a reformed political process. A greater number of formal channels and a bridge in the inequality gap embedded in the channels would enable citizens to fully exercise their voices and influence over government. Moreover, hard-headed determination in reshaping government institutions could also foster increasingly open, inclusive, and responsive political environments. Hopefully, this study will inspire scholars and practitioners to rise to the challenge of identifying and creating conditions that may facilitate the expansion of the democratic potential of authoritarian deliberation.

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