

The Enhancement of Deliberative Democracy in Local China
Democratic Deliberation on the 2008 Financial Budgeting in Zeguo Township

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“Let me say something about this issue. Wenchang Pavilion is the cultural and historic heritage of our township, passed over by our ancestors. We ought to protect it. The 2 million RMB budgets might not be sufficient.” “Wenchang Pavilion needs protection, but we can postpone it, since a more important issue facing us is concerned with people’s living. The 2 million budgets should be facilitated to the more urgent projects such as the Subsistence Allowance System.” “There is nothing wrong to construct a civic square, since our town gets richer now, it’s necessary to have a good image. However, the roads in some of the villages are still very bumpy, and the half million budgets for the “Village-to-Village” project are not enough. We should cut the 5 million budgets for the civic square project and reallocate the money to the rural road construction.” These were not discussions by the deputies to the People’s Congress. In fact, this was an active scene captured from the democratic deliberation (the sincere heart-to-heart discussion) about the 2008 financial budgeting allocation in Zeguo Township, which was participated by 197 randomly selected peasants (175 actual participants) from the total population of 120 thousand citizens in Zeguo Township, and hosted by Yifei Mu, the Deputy Director of the CPC Zhejiang Committee Publicity Department.

The democratic deliberation of the 2008 financial budgeting in Zeguo Township was held on February 20, 2008, in Zeguo Township of Wenling City. This was the third experimentation of the deliberative polling in Zeguo Township, Wenling City, Zhejiang Province after the democratic deliberations (the sincere heart-to-heart discussions) in 2005 and 2006. After investigation, we thought, the democratic deliberation not only enhanced the deliberative democracy in Wenling City, but also enhanced the Chinese-style deliberative democracy in local China.

First of all, the content of the democratic deliberation (the sincere heart-to-heart discussion) was widened and enhanced. Financial budgeting is vital for modern government. In fact, financial budgeting is not simply budget allocation, but a problem concerning how to perform government duties. Moreover, financial budgeting is not only related to the money of the government, but also how to use the money of the tax payers. In China, the reform of financial budgeting is not only concerned with the transformation of government duties. More importantly, it is concerned with the establishment of a modern public financial system in China. That being said, Zeguo Township captured a critical issue concerning the modern government by democratically deliberating the allocation of financial budgets. Before the deliberative discussion (the sincere heart-to-heart discussion), the government of Zeguo Township made a 48-page “2008 Zeguo Township Budget of Financial Expenditures” (printed on A4 papers), providing a detailed list of the allocation of the 248.523 million RMB budgets available for Zeguo Township in 2008 for the 196 randomly selected public opinion representatives to deliberate and discuss. Fan Li, one of the opinion representatives, said that the list of the budget allocation was even more detailed than his own account book. He thought Zeguo budget allocation table must be the most detailed one among the participatory budgeting projects he was aware of so far. Before the NPC and CPC conference in 2007, some deputies to the National People’s Congress criticized the Financial Department, saying that the central and local budgets provided by them were too sketchy and thus had no substantial meanings since the deputies had no way to audit them. In fact, only budgets with detailed allocations could be useful for auditing purposes. From the deliberative discussion of the “2005 Civil Construction Project” and the “2006 City and Township Construction Preselected Projects”, to the deliberative discussion of the “2007 Demolition and Relocation of Urban Housing”, and to the deliberation of the “2008 Financial Budgeting”, it is demonstrated that the democratic deliberation (the sincere heart-to-heart discussion) has become a key issue of the modern government.

Secondly, the random selection of opinion representatives promises representation and justice. Random sampling is a scientific technique applying the statistical theories to social surveys. The purpose of random sampling is to scientifically represent the population by selecting a good and representative sample. Random sampling reflects the principle of equality of the deliberative democracy, where everyone has an equal probability of being selected meaning that

all people are equal in a statistical sense. In 2005 and 2006, the deliberative polling in Zeguo Township applied the random sampling techniques, which were vividly called the “Ping Pang Ball Drawing” by local people. The allocation of the opinion representatives was determined by the size of the village – 4 people were randomly selected from villages of 1,000 or more people and 2 people were randomly selected from villages of less than 1,000 people. Every household in the town was given a random number, and if the Ping Pang ball with a specific number was selected, that household could have a member to participate in the deliberative poll. In 2008, the 197 opinion representatives were selected from the villager voting registers based on random sampling techniques, so in principle they could represent the public opinions of about 120 thousand residents in Zeguo Township. Moreover, the 197 opinion representatives were randomly assigned to 13 small groups for deliberative discussions about the 2008 financial budgeting. This was another successful experimentation of applying modern scientific methods to the democratic deliberation (the sincere heart-to-heart discussion) in Zeguo Township, which demonstrated that the democratic deliberation in Zeguo Township became more precise and scientific.

Thirdly, filling out the same questionnaire before and after the discussion tested the value and importance of deliberation. The questionnaire is very important, since it reflects participants’ real opinions which they may not be willing to speak out aloud. Using the questionnaire to reflect a variety of opinions of the participants, it is completely different from the citizen jury. The result of the citizen jury is a recommendation report, which always requires the jury members to reach a consensus and force some individuals to give up their own opinions. Deliberative polling does not pursue a consensus; rather, it represents the opinions of the participants by relying on questionnaire surveys and statistical methods. Participants fill out the same questionnaire twice, before and after the deliberative discussion. Their answers were then compared to examine the effects and results of the democratic deliberation. The result of the second questionnaire survey was the basis for policymaking. For example, the mean of the social security was 8.3 in the first questionnaire survey before the discussion, and 8.8 in the second survey after the discussion, and the p-value was 0.052. The change of the means of social security provided the basis for the scientific decision-making of Zeguo government. The decisions of the deputies to the People’s Congress also suggested that the budgets for the pensions for the rural seniors with hardship would increase from 20 thousand RMB to 100 thousand RMB. The decision was made

scientifically and democratically based on a randomly selected sample, the large and small group discussions, and the statistical analyses. After the experimentations in 2005 and 2006, the democratic deliberation of the 2008 financial budgeting applied the same methodology again. The statistical results suggested that, compared to the first questionnaire survey, the results from the second survey changed dramatically for some questions, changed slightly for some question, and remained unchanged for the other questions. The data provided by the 2008 Zeguo questionnaire surveys once again proved the value and significance of the deliberation mechanism. Meanwhile, the methods of randomization and two questionnaire surveys demonstrated that the democratic deliberation in Zeguo Township became more scientific and accurate. The deliberative polls in 2005, 2006, and 2008 all reflected the public concerns with the environment issues. Therefore, Zeguo government decided to increase the 2008 financial budgets for the environment protection by 8.89%.

Fourthly, the opinion representatives interacted with the deputies to the People's Congress. There were two interactions. Besides the 197 opinion representatives, the democratic deliberation (the sincere heart-to-heart discussion) of the 2008 Zeguo financial budgeting invited 93 deputies to the Township People's Congress (63 people actually participated) to observe the discussion. The deputies to the People's Congress could speak out during the small group discussion; however, they have no right to raise their hands and speak out in the large group discussion. The purpose of letting the deputies to the People's Congress observe the discussion was to provide these deputies, who are already opinion representatives, another opportunity to better and more vividly listen to and understand public opinions. On February 29th during the Township People's Congress conference, a democratic dialogue was taken place between the deputies to the Township People's Congress and the township leaders. Ten opinion representatives that participated in the democratic deliberation of the financial budgeting were invited to observe the talk between the deputies and the township leaders and the debate among the deputies to the People's Congress. Same as the 63 deputies to the Township People's Congress who observed the democratic deliberation, the 10 opinion representatives had no right to raise their hands and speak out in this talk. The "Zeguo Experimentation" of the interaction between opinion representatives and deputies to the People's Congress demonstrated that the legitimacy of decisions made by the

deputies to the People's Congress was improving toward a better representation of public opinions, and the public opinions were continuously turning into legitimate decisions.

As a matter of fact, the People's Congress of Zeguo Township, the deputies to the Township People's Congress and the people's government respect public opinions and are willing to adopt people's opinions. The suggestions proposed by the opinion representatives in the deliberative discussion about the financial budgeting on February 20th, 2008 were reflected by the voting decision in the People's Congress conference on February 29th. The following four decisions suggested that public opinions were fully respected and adopted: (1) the opinion representatives thought the pensions for the rural seniors with hardship should be increased, and the decision made by township government and People's Congress was to increase the original budgets from 20 thousand to 100 thousand RMB by reallocating the 80 thousand RMB budgets for the 2nd stage construction of the civic square in central district; (2) opinion representatives thought the subsidies for the infrastructure construction in villages with hardship should be increased, and the decision made by township government and People's Congress was to reallocate the 400 thousand RMB budgets for the "every village has projects" program to subsidize the infrastructure construction in villages with hardship, and adjust the original budgets for the "every village has projects" program from 1.6 million RMB to 1.2 million; (3) opinion representatives thought the budgets for the construction of the small-sized farm irrigation and water conservatory should be increased, and the decision made by township government and People's Congress was to increase the original budgets from 0.5 million to 1 million RMB by reallocating the 0.5 million budgets for the construction of the civic square; (4) the opinions about Wenchang Pavilion were significantly diverged both among opinion representatives and the deputies to the People's Congress. The original budgets were 2 million RMB, and the People's Congress decided to cut it down to half. The results from the deliberative poll in 2005 supported this decision, where the mean of the question concerning Wenchang Pavilion was 5.9 in the first questionnaire survey and 5.0 in the second survey.

Min Zhao, the secretary of the party committee, and Xiaoyu Wang, the chief of Zeguo Township claimed that both the party committee and the government respected public opinions, and they would continue to listen to people's opinions by conducting democratic deliberations (sincere heart-to-heart discussions), provide better opportunities and systems to help the

government understand public opinions more efficiently, and make the public opinion a critical basis for policymaking, putting the “people oriented” governance concept into effect. They also claimed that the 2009 financial budgeting would continue to listen to people’s opinions by conducting democratic deliberations (sincere heart-to-heart discussions), and the budget allocation for the 2009 financial expenditures would be prepared in advance and provided to the opinion representatives earlier, so that the opinion representative would have sufficient time to read the documents.

After investigations, we found that several factors promised the success and achievements of the “Zeguo Experimentation”. (1) The government leaders paid lots of attention. The successful implementation of “Zeguo Experimentation” could not be achieved without the support of the city leaders, the participation of the publicity department of the city committee, and the active preparation by the township leaders, especially the secretary and chief of the township. (2) Obeying the principles of Democracy and Rule of Law. The local leaders of Wenling City claimed some time earlier that they conducted the local democratic political experiments based on the premise that they won’t conflict with the democratic trends and the current laws and regulations. (3) Paying attention to the procedures. The “Zeguo Experimentation” emphasized procedures and methodology. The moderators for the group discussion during the democratic deliberation were trained. The deputies of the People’s Congress were also trained concerning financial budgeting issues by experts from the Shanghai People’s Congress. In addition, the practitioners of the “Zeguo Experimentation” carefully considered every detail in order to assure equality and efficacy of the deliberation (the sincere heart-to-heart discussion). (4) The collaboration of local government with scholars.

The “Zeguo Experimentation” is not complicated in either theory or techniques, and it’s easy to “replicate” by other local governments. The key issue is that whether the local officials would really support and implement the governance concepts of “three points for people” advocated by the central government. If they adopt such governance concepts, experiments like the “Zeguo Experimentation” will also emerge and develop in other local governments.