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Participatory budgeting and political representation in China

Emilie Frenkiel

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Abstract

In this paper I conduct a comparative analysis of three Chinese experiments with participatory budgeting (PB), a democratic innovation that has circulated worldwide. Relying on a renewed typology of political representation and ethnographic fieldwork combined with official data collection in Chengdu, Sichuan and Wenling, Zhejiang over seven years, it investigates the expansion and practice of PB and analyzes the relationship between participation and representation. It asserts that in the Chinese context PB cannot be simply reduced to empowering civil society against established representatives or becoming an instrument of legitimization for established elites. In the three investigated cases – which are not representative of Chinese local politics – PB does contribute to opening the decision-making process to formerly excluded participants, who are nonetheless not exactly ordinary citizens but rather local elites and “super residents” bridging the gap between established elites and residents.

Keywords: China; participatory budgeting; participatory democracy; representation; Wenling; Chengdu

Introduction

Participatory Budgeting (hereafter PB) is a democratic innovation that has been spreading globally since the 1990s, from Latin America to Europe and more recently Asia. In this paper I propose to conduct a comparative analysis of three experiments with PB in China: one in Chengdu, Sichuan and two in Wenling, Zhejiang. My investigation focuses on the relationship between participation and representation, and more precisely on the forms that political representation can take within participatory devices. Raising this question with regard to China, where political representation is still the monopoly of the Chinese Communist Party (hereafter CCP) and influenced by Leninist and Maoist theories,¹ leads me to argue that devices such as PB may disrupt existing patterns of representation.

PB is a rare case of democratic innovation originating from the global South (Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 1989) and having successfully circulated world-wide². It gives citizens and social organizations a platform to discuss the priority of different projects and vote on the expenditure plan, as well as the ability to supervise the proposed budgetary expenditure of the government – thereby in theory made more transparent, inclusive and responsible.³ After a first wave of enthusiastic studies investigating successful and radical experiments in Brasil, their outcomes and contextual variations, and developing a comparative framework,⁴ later research has focused on cases where PB is peripheral, its outcomes over-determined and the decision-making of participants is far removed from any locus of local power.⁵ This has led observers to wonder what is left of the initial radicalism of the Porto Alegre experience, where PB was a transformative, empowering institution attached to the project of democratizing democracy.⁶

Even though PB has been intensely studied, research specifically focused on its impact on representation is scarce because PB was designed in the first place to compensate for the limits of representative democracy. Two types of relationship of PB with political representation have been identified : participation challenges existing forms and principles of representation through a new, “assumed representation” by civil society activists;⁷ and participation is instrumentalised by classic actors of representation who use participatory devices to communicate about their action and boost their legitimacy.⁸ This article explores a third, ignored, relationship : participation can also redistribute representation ; that is, with participatory devices, weak representatives can find new strength and new official representative roles can be created.⁹ This means that investigating forms and principles of representation in PB processes helps go beyond assessment based on the radical/neo-liberal axis and constitute important criteria to assess the transformative nature of PB.

In this article, I proceed with this line of investigation and use the framework originating from the confrontation of the Delhi and Chengdu cases by Frenkiel and Tawa Lama Rewal in order to compare various Chinese PB devices.¹⁰ China is an interesting country of application of PB because this participatory device focuses on the budget and therefore is always implemented in a top-down manner. Through discussing a largely similar procedure that has been implemented in an authoritarian regime, my aim is not to contribute to the discussion on the democratic nature, or to the democratic possibilities and limitations of PB per se. My investigation centers on the relationship between participation and representation, and more precisely on the forms that

political representation can take within participatory devices.

Hanna Pitkin posited the existence of a stable meaning of the concept of representation and the equivalence of political representation with electoral politics, a consensus in English and American political theory.¹¹ She identified four different forms of representation: descriptive, symbolic, formalistic and substantive.

In some languages like German, Chinese or Italian, the words used for representation are more diverse, which has allowed other approaches to representation to put the centrality of representation in its legal-political sense (the mandate) into perspective. Yves Sintomer, inspired by the work of Hasso Hoffman, has developed a useful typology of representation to go beyond the “deceptive familiarity” of representation and its occurrences in English and Romance languages.¹² He divides representation into two categories: political-legal and symbolic. Within the category of political-legal representation, the most conventional meaning is mandate representation (acting for), but it also has the meaning of identity representation or embodiment (acting as). In the framework of embodiment representation, the explicit expression of consent, delegation or further screening from the represented to authorize the representative to speak and act on their behalf is not required. In fact, the representation relationship is supposed to be based on an immediate community of interests, opinions, beliefs and often identity between the representative and the represented. Taking identity representation into consideration is crucial when studying representation in China, as it allows us to understand political-legal representation despite the absence of direct elections of top leaders. As to symbolic representation, it cannot only take the form of making an absent present (figuration) but also implies the exhibition of a presence, an aspect which Pitkin overlooked. To complete this typology, Sintomer also highlights the difference between representation as distinction and descriptive representation,¹³ which cuts across the divide between symbolic and legal-judicial conceptions of representation. When representation is conceived as distinction, famously illustrated by Madison¹⁴ or Sieyes¹⁵, representatives are expected to be more capable, wiser and more civic-oriented than the represented. In contrast, when representation is conceived as descriptive, there is a demand for similarity between the represented and the representatives, who must “mirror” (look like) the former.

Political-legal and symbolic representation can both take distinction, description and substantive forms. It must be also noted that these are ideal types that may often overlap in real politics but identifying them separately is useful for deconstructing and analyzing different nuances and forms of representative claims.

Since the representative turn, representation has been understood to be located everywhere,¹⁶ and to be constitutive and performative.¹⁷ This approach, often focused on representative claims, is a performative act in itself: it decentralizes the role of the representative and destabilizes the traditional distinction between participatory and representative politics.¹⁸ While many scholars of participatory democracy have discussed how PB fits into electoral logics and representative democracy, or how elected representatives deal with PB (often to conclude that they use it as an instrument to enhance their legitimacy), I propose here to take stock of Sintomer’s typology and the approach offered by the representative turn and reverse the perspective: since representation is consubstantial to politics, then what form does it take in a participatory device such as PB?

Materials and methods

This paper focuses on exceptional cases of implementation of PB in China, it does not claim that China has successfully established participatory democracy. Methodologically speaking, I present and analyse three PB experiments based on two investigations conducted between January 2013 and January 2020. My sources are more than 40 semi-structured individual and collective interviews with local cadres, PB participants and involved researchers, as well as observations of local assemblies. I also analyze official documentation and secondary literature. In Wenling, my study is based on observation and qualitative interviews conducted in 2013, 2014 and 2020 as well as official documentation and abundant academic studies.¹⁹ In Chengdu, my study is based on observations, collection of official material and interviews from 2016 to 2019. The case is less documented than Wenling and apart from activist Ming Zhuang's study of early implementation of PB, this fieldwork has been exploratory.²⁰ Even though Wenling is the most studied PB case in China, it has rarely been studied in a comparative manner²¹ and never approached from the joint perspective of participation and representation.

On the basis of this comparison of the discourses, practices and outcomes of different PB experiments in authoritarian China, my hypothesis is that PB is a procedure that may disrupt existing patterns of representation (electoral or not) insofar as it redistributes political representation. The introduction of PB in the Chinese context makes such disruption salient, but this concerns experimentations with participatory devices anywhere in the world.

The Chinese context for the introducing PB

In theory Chinese villages are, with a long historical legacy, ruled autonomously from the state as, under the current system, the last administrative echelon is the township. In reality, village governance is however strongly influenced by the the Party-state in the guise of the township and county governments and powerful Party cells in all villages. Until the 1999 national budget reform, the administrative-led system was fragmented and unaccountable, even within the government. After the market-oriented economic reforms launched in 1979, a shift from an owner state to a tax state was observed, as revenue could no longer solely rely on state-owned enterprises and a system of revenue extraction had to be recreated. Starting from 1980, the system had become more decentralized but the local (provincial) governments only received a legally-guaranteed share of budgetary power from 1992 on. The 1999 budget reform combined three forms of institutional accountability : bureaucratic, horizontal and societal, which sparsely emerged at local level with citizen participatory budgeting.²² It took place in the context of the introduction of schemes such as “the openness of the village account” and “the democratic management of the village account” in the early 1990s,²³ which allowed Chinese villagers to start monitoring budgeting with the aim of ensuring that village leaders (village committee²⁴ and party branch) manage public goods, distribute village funds in a fair way, and invest village money effectively. In 2005, it was practiced for the first time in Wenling, Zhejiang province, in Xinhe and in Zeguo townships. These pioneering experiences have considerably evolved and expanded since.

PB is now unequally practiced in different places in China²⁵ but Wenling's case has remained exceptional even though it has been known and emulated all over the country. First, this can be explained by the fact that very few places have truly adopted more transparent budget practices, as budgeting has long been regarded as an exclusive instrument discreetly used by governments to ensure their authority. In the 2017 open budget index, China was ranked 92 among 115 countries

worldwide, much lower than other BRICS such as Brazil (7th), Russia (15th), and India (53rd). Li Fan's typology of PB models in China provides a second explanation for Wenling's uniqueness. Among PB models, the Wenling model is the most sophisticated and ambitious as it not only comprises budget transparency and citizen consultation but also involves the local government and the local People's Congress (*renda dabiao*). The minimalist menu-style PB is easier to emulate as it allows citizens to select only a limited number of projects. The pure PB model entails budget transparency and citizen consultation over a lump of money to spend on community projects. These two latter models do not require the involvement of the local People's Congress.²⁶

I focus in this paper on two participatory budgeting schemes taking place in pioneer Wenling townships, called *minzhu kentanbui* (democratic honest talk), and a third one in Chengdu's village councils, called *cunmin yishibui* (literally, meetings where rural inhabitants discuss official business), which have never been investigated conjointly before. Analyzing them through the lens of representation will help further our understanding of where they stand in global comparisons of PB circulation. It will not only allow us to understand PB in Chengdu but also to better differentiate between various township experiments with PB in Wenling.

Case studies

Wenling's kentanbui

Minzhu kentanbui, have taken place in Wenling, in China's developed Eastern Zhejiang province. They have made Wenling the main reference in participatory and deliberative innovations in China as the first PB devices ever experimented in China took place in two of its townships: Zeguo and Xinhe. There are 1.2 million permanent inhabitants in Wenling county-level municipality (and an equivalent floating population), comprising 97 villages, 11 rural townships and 5 towns. This rural municipality has a vibrant private economy and belongs to China's 100 most developed county-level municipalities in China. Its major industries, mostly based on family enterprises, produce shoes, water pumps, air compressors, aluminum and plastic materials, automobile and motorcycle accessories, hardware and new building materials.

The *kentanbui* derives from local interpretations of central and provincial guidelines to organize meetings and educate farmers concerning rural modernization. Propaganda sessions used to be a bore for villagers but the four grievance-venting forums which took place in Songmen township in 1999 were quite popular. Self-appointed participants discussed topics ranging from the township's investment environment and construction plans to neighbourhood disputes and the prices of liquefied gas and, out of the 110 questions they raised, 84 were answered on the spot.²⁷ The first institutional participatory designs surfaced in 2001 at county level²⁸ when the Party committee harmonized various experiments and extended the *kentanbui* to administrative departments (regarding new policies, changes in administrative system or procedures, fees and services), urban districts, urban residential communities, townships, villages (regarding major policies or projects), public organizations and non-state enterprises. Between 1999 and 2005, 190 were held at the township level and 1,190 at the village level. 400,000 people (35 per cent of the county population) participated by reportedly raising over 38,000 opinions.²⁹ *Kentanbui* were experimented in a great variety of ways.

In this article, we only focus on the two most radical and famous variations of the "honest talk" at township level in Zeguo and Xinhe where different kinds of assemblies discussing the local budget have taken place once a year since 2005.³⁰ Behind the simultaneous introduction of PB in these two townships was a young local cadre, Chen Yimin, who benefitted from outside support

including scholars and social organizations. Jiang Zhaohua, Zeguo's party secretary at the time has been credited with the introduction of PB in Zeguo after taking part in an international conference on deliberative democracy in 2004. Professor He Baogang helped him introduce PB under the guise of deliberative polling while social activist Li Fan contributed to the introduction of PB in Xinhe. As Chen Yimin did not occupy a senior position, he lacked sufficient formal authority on his counterparts. It resulted in some officials refusing to implement *kentanbui*, which they perceived as a waste of time. During Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao's second mandate (2007-2012), the central authority however officially promoted "citizens' orderly participation", which granted formal legitimacy to participatory innovations in Wenling. The favorable political climate allowed Chen Yimin to set up PB at all levels of government in Wenling and persuade district authorities to include the yearly organization of PB in the system of the evaluation of the main local officials, thus decisively affecting their income and career promotion.

In Zeguo (120,000 inhabitants), PB was introduced in a hybridized form of deliberative polling, a deliberative democratic innovation invented by professor James Fishkin³¹. Residents were drawn by lot from different pools (experts and cadres, ordinary residents and later migrant workers, which is highly uncommon in China), and others were nominated by the villages, to participate in discussion and the ranking of 30 construction projects on a scale of 0 to 10, so as to choose a dozen projects. When selected, participants were given a first questionnaire to fill and were provided with balanced briefing materials. They were to carefully examine each proposal in small groups, discuss their merits and identify key questions for competent experts to answer in plenary sessions. At the end of the day, they filled the questionnaire a second time to detect their change of opinion. The ranking decided after deliberation substantially differed from the ranking favored by local officials, who had to observe without taking part in the discussions. It was however binding and the local People's Congress adopted it³². Ever since, the design, which is weakly institutionalized, has evolved but the sortition of some kind of mini-public has been kept. The device is questioned at city level and the discussions which take place no longer follow the strict rules of the deliberative polling. It only did in the first four *kentanbui* until 2009.³³

It is no coincidence that PB has successfully settled in Zeguo, as it is a highly industrialized township, with a fiscally rich government.³⁴ It is the birthplace of the first joint-stock cooperative enterprise in China, with a thriving industry and prosperous wholesale markets of national reputation. However most of the tax revenue of rich townships like Zeguo goes to the county government (Wenling), which transfers only a certain portion of it back. As a matter of fact, Zeguo's fiscal affluence comes from its land revenue,³⁵ which is free of upper-level governments' interference and can be used by local officials with discretion. It is nonetheless safer to spend it in the framework of PB so as to avoid accusations of corruption and popular protests.

In Xinhe, which is not as developed as Zeguo township, PB was introduced in 2005 by the local Party's committee and the People's Congress to make the budget of the government more transparent and accessible to participants, as well as to members of the local people's assembly. Contrary to Zeguo, the whole township budget plan and process were debated in the *kentanbui*. Under the Party committee's leadership, the representatives of the People's Congress and ordinary citizens participated in the making of all the budgets for personnel funds, public funds and project funds. They participated in the whole budgetary process (decision, execution and evaluation). In July 2005, the township leaders presented for the first time a detailed version of the budget and considerably modified it according to the demands of the local representatives

(People's Congress members) through a three-step process: five days before the *kentanhui*, public announcements invited all citizens to attend. In each village, volunteers were selected and recommended by the village committee and the Party committee according to their social and professional status (former cadres, teachers, entrepreneurs, farmers etc.) and dispatched in different groups. The general budget was distributed to participants three days before the meeting. Collective discussions were mostly attended by People's Congress representatives, Party cadres, local officials, members of the consultative conference, local entrepreneurs and accountants, with some ordinary citizens. During the debates, everybody had an equal right to speak and they were divided in thematic subgroups (environment, social security, infrastructures, an all-female group etc.) which did not interact. The government had the final say and coordinated the various projects it submitted to the local people's congress the following day. The township leaders had to explain in greater details expenditures and adjust the budget. For instance, they were made to reduce the originally budgeted RMB700,000 to replace aging vehicles to RMB500,000 yuan, which allowed an extra RMB200,000 to be allocated to improve the running water system.³⁶ The last phase was the constitution of a financial work group constituted to oversee the implementation of the township's budget. The control of the budget by members of the People's Congress, which never happened before at the township level in China, took place in November. This process has taken place annually since that first year.

In Xinhe, public participation concerns especially the first step of budgetary power: determining budgets. But it has also played a greater role in the supervision of budgets as citizens can send suggestions to the People's Congress' financial work group. The peculiarity of Xinhe's PB is the combination of public participation (mostly composed of self-selected elites) and People's Congress representatives in deciding the whole township budget plan and process.

While the process has considerably evolved in Zeguo – notably departing from deliberative polling after 2009, but also the release of the complete budget in 2008, with updates like the introduction of migrant groups and e-voting methods – the process has been quite stable in Xinhe. Over the years, the PB design in Xinhe hasn't evolved much apart from the expansion of the number of groups organized by the People's Congress to discuss the budget. In 2005, there were three groups devoted to industry, agriculture and social issues. Since 2012, there are twelve groups whose discussions are synthesized and reported to the People's Congress. Since elected representatives take part in these discussions mostly organized among various elite groups, the process has been smooth and discussions have been taken into account in the final People's Congress session. In Zeguo, where discussions are less centered on elected representatives, with more ordinary citizens included, the opinions of participants are taken into serious consideration by the People's Congress even though there have been three occurrences when PB results have been rejected by the People's Congress. It is Xinhe's model which has gradually extended to other townships – with variations – as Zeguo's model is more radical, complex and expensive. In Ruoheng township, the budget was distributed one month and not five days before the meeting, the township was divided into six zones where discussions took place and more argumentation was introduced. The experiment failed but it forced Xinhe to deepen the process.

Chengdu's yishihui

The PB scheme taking place in Chengdu's village councils, (*yishihui*), is an interesting case because of its scale, design standardization and institutionalization. Chengdu, capital city of Sichuan

province comprises twenty separate administrative units: eleven districts (under city administration), five county-level cities, and four counties embracing 258 towns and townships and 117 urban street committees (Sichuan statistical yearbook 2017). As regards «grassroots level» (*ji*ceng) organizations, there are 1,650 communities (*shequjuzhixingweibui*) and 2,686 village committees (*cunmin weiyuanhui*). The prefectural-level Chengdu government is an informal but powerful government echelon below the provincial and central levels. Chengdu is the fourth most populated city in China with 16 million inhabitants including 14 million holding Chengdu resident status (*hukou*). 70% of the population is now urban with close to half of them living in Chengdu city. PB has affected the lives and practices of 5 million villagers since 2009 and has been expanded to urban communities since 2012³⁷. These local meetings are organized to discuss village projects, which have been made transparent and open to deliberation within the framework of these village council “representatives” (*daibiao*). *Yishihui* were first sparsely organized for farmers to discuss land issues triggered by the Property Law of 2007 (which maintained state ownership over land but gave individual use rights the same level of protection as afforded state and collective rights) and the severe and unsolvable conflicts it led to. Their embryonic form originated in Mayan village, Qionglai county, where knowledgeable, skillful senior villagers, party members, former cadres and other “village elites” who still inhabited the villages were invited to discuss and decide land rights issues. It also took place in villages in Shuangliu county. After the devastating 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, such deliberative platforms were all the more needed to discuss reconstruction. In 2009, former Party secretary of Sichuan province Li Chuncheng decided to formally introduce PB in villages with the help of scholars like Li Ling (Sichuan Academy of social sciences). A regular platform was needed to discuss budgets and projects, as well as to alleviate citizen discontent with local officials, which slowed down policy implementation and led to petitioning and protests.

Another important contextual element is that, since 2003, Chengdu has undertaken wide-ranging reforms to integrate and balance rural-urban development, which led to the central government designing it as a pilot city to explore how best to do this in 2007. To break down the dual economy, Chengdu created a single regional plan for public services covering the entire Chengdu region.³⁸ The plan prioritizes rural infrastructures and the equalization of public services between rural, peri-urban, and urban areas based on a public fiscal system providing enough financial resources, especially in rural Chengdu.³⁹ Local authorities plan and implement the majority of rural investment but 8 of the 59 rural public services classified by the Chengdu government are delivered by local villages, whose residents are required to participate directly in their local public decisions and services. From 2009 to the end of 2014, the village-level Special Funds invested by the Chengdu Government amounted to 5.8 billion RMB corresponding to 12,000 projects. What I call PB in this case therefore refers to the significant budget allocated since late 2008 by Chengdu prefecture for improvement of village-level public services, called “Village-Level Public Service Funds” (*cunji gonggong fuwu zijin*). Chengdu’s government directly shares revenue with villages, which in 2009 received 200,000RMB (32,000USD) and lately up to four times more⁴⁰. From 2009 to 2014, 580 million RMB have been allocated in the participatory budgeting processes to implement village infrastructure projects. The per capita annual amount debated was around 22USD, which ranks quite high in world comparisons and is at least equivalent or slightly higher nowadays⁴¹. Projects eligible for PB fall into four major categories: culture, literacy and fitness; basic services and infrastructure for local economic development (90% of the funding):

including village roads, drainage, gardening, irrigation and water supply; agricultural training, such as farming and business training for villagers; and village management, which includes village security, village administration and sanitation. In addition, villages can apply for a loan along with the PB funds they receive, to allow them to finance larger projects.⁴²

The strict standardization of the *yishibui* was first tested in Pengzhou, a 1.2 million-inhabitant county-level municipality located north of Chengdu where the recent urbanization and pluralisation of interests, the fast sale of collective rural land as well as polluting petrochemical industry triggered conflicts between the local government, farmers and industries. With professor Huang Guohua, Yao Minshuang, head of Pengzhou's United Front department⁴³ experimented the "deliberation and social dialogue system" in Pengzhou's townships and villages. Having in mind the pioneer experiments in Wenling, which lacked institutional stability, local leaders and scholars decided to buttress the innovation on the institutionalized *yishibui* – the 1982 Chinese constitution defines village councils (*yishibui*) as optional village institutions whose members are residents (of whom party members can only be a minority) elected by secret ballots and one person per vote for three years by all the village residents. They also strictly coordinated the process with the township level and the People's Congress so as to write the whole process into the local law. As this is highly uncommon, it drew the attention of senior leaders and scholars and was tested in other municipalities (Chongzhou and Dujiangyan) in the whole Chengdu region after the 18th central party congress (2013), which endorsed popular participation.

All over China, every three years, villagers vote for their village committee members as well as their village council representatives where village councils are set up.⁴⁴ Villages are divided in six or seven village small groups whose number of representatives (usually two to four) depends on their size. All in all, one council representative is elected every five to fifteen households. In Chengdu, these meetings are not optional but compulsory and very strictly organized. In most *yishibui*, 25-29 representatives (not more for the sake of quality deliberation) gather and discuss construction projects, public services the residents need, environment protection, land distribution, urban-rural integration and other divisive issues before the Party secretary and other officials or bureaucrats they invited to discuss with. Participants must be an odd number and include at least one third of women. They are often community-oriented people like former officials, Party members (restricted to a minority) and notables.

According to regulations, in each village, the *yishibui* decides how the village budget is to be spent. The main projects the allocated budget should be spent on are voted once a year (before March). Representatives first make proposals based on prior consultation of the households which voted for them. They deliberate and decide which projects (building or fixing roads, temples, schools, shelters, parking lots, canals and drains, setting up CCTV, paying extra money to social workers, buying official cars etc.) should be selected before taking part in their implementation by choosing which enterprise will be in charge. When the projects are in progress or completed, the representatives responsible for supervising and assessing their execution give reports during the *yishibui*. Beside budget issues, other important matters are raised and debated during the meetings. Distribution of the *dibao* (allocation for the poorest households) and land and environment disputes are expected to be settled during *yishibui*. If the questions which come up during the meetings are too important or their scale too large to be processed at this level, they can be discussed in the following meeting with the relevant bureau or official if they are specialized or

they are discussed in the local congress, especially if the projects put forward by villagers exceed a certain amount. The role of *yishihui* representatives and the response of bureaucrats are clearly defined in the local law and guidelines. Even though they stem from the awareness and acknowledgement of diverse interests and views – and the PB manual distributed widely (2 million copies of a 42-page illustrated manual were distributed) encourages to voice their opinion, even when it conflicts with the Party secretary – their objective is to build consensus and they do not leave too much room for emotion, which is perceived as a sign of backwardness and lack of “civilization” or immature citizenship.

These three PB cases, which are not representative of local budget decision-making in China, are therefore quite different. Not only the administrative level, selection of participants and the design of discussions vary. They also differ in institutionalization, formalization and stability of the process as in Wenling, *kentanbui* are semi-institutionalized and have varied quite significantly over the years for the sake of improvement.⁴⁵ To make up for the weak institutionalization of the process and guarantee that it will not be interrupted by less supportive leaders, Zeguo’s People’s Congress passed two regulations detailing how discussions should be conducted from 2013 on.⁴⁶ As the PB is founded on the power structure and institutional platform of the People’s Congress in Xinhe and *kentanbui* are organized every year just before the Congress convenes, the process is more stabilized than in Zeguo. It is however not fully institutionalized and runs the risk of being interrupted when new leaders enter the scene, which has already happened in the past.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, compared to Chengdu’s formalized *yishihui*-embedded PB, PB in Wenling suffers from two acute disadvantages: residents are not the final decision-makers and this process is not protected by the constitution. This can be interpreted as official reluctance to fully empower ordinary citizens and write more radical participatory innovations into law.⁴⁸

PB participants as “super-residents”

Despite differences in PB processes, the discourse on PB and representation is similar in Zeguo, Xinhe and Chengdu. Local cadres’ discourse is framed in line with central guidelines and reveals the instrumentality of encouraging manageable participation of the public, through the careful design of participants’ selection and discussion.

So as to be better accepted by Party cadres, PB tends to be framed as a governance instrument aligned with central policy, institutions (including the United Front, the mass line and consultative conferences) and needs – curbing corruption, improving administrative efficiency, and enhancing state capacity.⁴⁹ The central discourse on “orderly citizen participation” (*gongmin youxu de zhengzhi canyu*), a policy manifestly designed to circumvent election thanks to citizen participation and consolidate the party’s legitimacy, thus collaterally granted official legitimacy to participatory and deliberative innovations in Wenling. PB (*canyushi yusuan*), which was never presented under this name when I was on the field, becomes a local tool of administrative incorporation, expanding participation so as to narrow contestation and maintain social stability, and not a threatening democratic device introduced by foreign agents. The *kentanbui* and *yishihui* are also associated with the central authorities’ concept of “consultative democracy” (*gonggong canyu*).⁵⁰ With this policy, consultation is more encouraged than previously in national and local congresses and in the political consultative conference system, but a new stress is especially put

on consulting grassroots organizations and organizing citizen participation at the level of villages and urban communities, so as to manage public dissatisfaction and protest.

In Wenling and Chengdu, the local discourse justifying the implementation of PB is in line with this national discourse. PB is expected to develop “honest” politics through self-government, autonomy, emphasis on participation so as to boost representation; it is meant to put an end to corruption, correct misrepresentation and restore trust – trust in the local cadres’ will and capacity to represent common people’s interests and needs because they are less remote from their realities. Local officials (village committee members, village party secretary and indirectly county officials) undeniably lose a great part of their discretionary powers by “letting masses decide for themselves” but *kentanbui* and *yishibui* are instrumental in reducing misunderstanding and tensions between the local population and themselves, thus facilitating their work. *Yishibui* are formally described by participants during interviews as “discussing things to make everything clear and finally agree again”. With these meetings, common citizens are expected to “decide” (*jueding, shuo le suan*) and “solve their problems among themselves” while the role of village committee members and party cadres is in theory reduced to convening and moderating the meetings. They are also expected to take stock of the decisions and reporting them to higher authorities and higher cadres and bureaucrats, who attend only if invited by the councils.

The idea that the number of letters and visits⁵¹ reflected the overall quality (*suzhi*) of the population was explicitly put forward during interviews and it may be representative of cadres’ perception of their superiority over their constituency, which can be of “low quality” (*suzhi di, bu wenming*) unreasonable, irrational (*bu lixing*), not to say annoying (*majian*). The meetings are conceived as ways to improve lay citizens’ understanding of the intricacies of policy-making and therefore their compliance with government decisions. One of the roles of participatory devices is therefore to provide legitimacy to the decision making, while keeping participation at a manageable level. And as most residents do not participate (and it may not be wished that they do so⁵²), participants are assumed to represent all residents. This representative intent of participation is clear in the attention that is put in the composition of such devices.

In this regard, when a representative claim is made, it is first and foremost by those who organize participation (bureaucrats and party cadres), which may be taken up, or not, by participants. It is indeed the organizers who need residents’ participation and the (perceived) difficulty to mobilize residents generates mechanisms in order to select representatives of residents, who ideally should be as close as possible to actual participants, at least sociologically speaking. Yet, there is a tension between the wish that representatives and represented should almost be the same, and a concern for efficiency and manageable participation. For instance, one of the initiators of participatory schemes in Wenling, Chen Yimin acknowledges that Zeguo participants are more representative of the overall population, but claims that it does not lead to better results because the discussions are said to be more rational (*lixing*) in Xinhe where only volunteers participate (they understand and have more interest in the budget). This tension results in the pursuit of an equilibrium between the search for the most common of the residents, and the selection of “super-residents” who will be acquainted with the administrative and political logics, and able to efficiently play the role of a go-between.

The role of “go between” emerges in all experiments under study. Such representation is two ways, and the participants also echo the voice of the bureaucrats, elected representatives (in Wenling) and local party secretary to the residents. As one council representative claims, they are

“meetings representing the views of the masses (*yishibhui shouxian daibiao qunzhong de yijian*) because they serve as a bridge for the bottom and the top to communicate”.⁵³ While this role of go-between may be presented as different from the role of a representative, « mediation » is a form of representation.⁵⁴ In this regard, while they might claim a status of “residents among residents” and refuse to be seen as representatives, they can simultaneously claim a specific status. In this regard, the logics of distinction at the core of representation⁵⁵ is also operative when it comes to participatory schemes.

Such logics can also be found when the participants are sorted by lot. In Zeguo, though opting out is not an option, it is generally the most educated who end up participating fully in the process. Moreover, participants selected by lot are now also selected the following year with the idea that they are more competent the second time, and not all are selected from the general population. Indeed, to insure the “quality” of deliberations, elites (village cadres, entrepreneurs, accountants, lawyers, school heads etc.) form a second pool among which yearly participants are also separately randomly selected. As a result, 100 participants are randomly selected among a separate elite pool while 200 are ordinary residents.

The search for efficiency, combined with the difficulty to maintain the interest of residents in participatory schemes results in the emergence of “almost professionalized” participants, who sometimes appear to be as close to local authorities as to residents (not in the case of ordinary residents randomly selected in Zeguo, which is sometimes described as the device’s major limitation, but very much the case in all other cases where only “capable” residents are invited to participate). Participants to *yishibhui* form a special group of villagers. They are local residents, villagers supposed to represent their neighbours, but they are expected to be endowed with special skills. They are said to express themselves well, understand both their neighbours and the cadres, and therefore to be proper mediators. Contrary to most villagers, they probably accept the constraint of these regular meetings and their obligations as representatives because they appreciate the prestige and status of their function.⁵⁶ Many clan leaders, former cadres and party members, who want to contribute and have a political role, are found among PB participants.

Simultaneously, as participants are initially not deemed to be representatives of the residents, but “residents among residents,” the rhetoric of proximity is a key one in the construction of representativeness. This proximity can be manifold. Ideally, proximity means perfect similarity between the representative and the represented. In most interviews, the participants were (self-) designated as “ordinary residents” and they referred to other residents as “neighbors”, implying that there was no difference between them, the representatives drawn by lot or elected by neighbouring households, and the represented. In both *yishibhui* and *kentanbui*, PB participants are sometimes designated as representatives (*daibiao*), but more often as participants (*canyuzhe*) or members (*chengyuan*). It is striking that representation is more often than not completely erased as participants are equalled with masses (*qunzhong*), residents (*cunmin*, *jumin*), peasants (*nongmin*) or common people (*laobaixing*) and more rarely with citizens (*gongmin*). Representation in this case seems to pertain to identity or embodiment representation (“acting as”), whereby the relation of representation is supposed to be based on an immediate community of interests, opinions, beliefs and often identity between the representative and the represented more than the expression of consent.⁵⁷ In Chengdu, identity representation actually seems to confer more legitimacy to *yishibhui* representatives than their legal-rational representation, that is the fact that they have been elected by villagers. In all cases, participants are encouraged to discuss the budget and projects with other

villagers, who might understand them better, and also to consult their neighbors so as to be able to represent their opinions. In Chengdu, the proximity makes this process easy. Village representatives are encouraged to consult their very limited constituency of neighbours (generally not more than 200) which they interact with on a daily basis (in the street, main square, local tea house, during collective events etc.) to raise issues, concoct and propose projects they feel strongly about, and pass on information on new policies as well as the sense the CCP cares for their needs and is responsive. A more systematic process of outreach, named « each household, one questionnaire » also takes place. Every household is handed out information on the past year's allocation of funds and the yearly budget, as well as a questionnaire to fill in and express their ideas on how to allocate funds. The *yishihui* representatives are in charge of sorting out and summarizing households proposals for the council to discuss.⁵⁸ In Zeguo, at a larger scale, officials recently created “public opinion representatives” to make sure randomly selected participants “truly represented everyone”, including those who were not selected. As a result, they required that all randomly selected participants visit at least ten families and collect their opinions on the issues to be discussed in the *kentanhui*.⁵⁹

Our analysis therefore confirms that, one of the main roles of participatory devices being to provide legitimacy to the decision making and limit protest movements, participants are assumed to represent all residents. Residents among residents, participants serve as mediators between government and residents endowed with both local knowledge and the advantages of proximity. They are sometimes fantasized as “super residents” bestowed with the necessary skills to get involved in decision making or run the risk of being discredited for their incompetence and inefficiency, which undermines the very principle of popular participation.

What participation changes to representation in Chengdu and Wenling

In all three cases, budget decisions and supervision are opened to new participants and stakeholders, without being fully entrusted to all ordinary citizens. The main objective of PB being to facilitate and improve governance while participation is simply the means chosen to do so, the priority is not citizen empowerment. Can it however be said it does not take place, and can't the lens of representation help us investigate that aspect ?

These are not cases of mere consultation – defined in Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation⁶⁰ as cases where rulers discuss with citizens but do not share power with them and ultimately freely decide what to do, cherry-picking some proposals without having to follow well-defined rules of the game. PB has indeed led to more accountability in the use of government funds in Wenling and Chengdu. By increasing financial transparency, as a direct result of earlier deliberative polling experiments, government officials have become more careful about using public funds and abiding by the budget in Wenling ; in Chengdu, the decision-making process regarding the use of village and urban community funds is now bottom-up. In all PB processes under scrutiny, participation is broader, in line with the principle of identifying and responding to ordinary citizens' needs. However, participation is also dialectically tamed so as to circumscribe its uncertain and risky outcomes. In free and open debate, parts of social life are bracketed in order to create a semblance of equality among participants and prevent the dissolution of the debate into real-world power relations.⁶¹ The democratic or egalitarian facade created by bracketing is nonetheless an impediment to the challenge of real inequalities in power, wealth, and status.

As regards representation, the impact is significant. If we refer to the three types of relationship between PB and political representation presented in the introduction of this article, it can be said that in our three cases participation only mildly challenges existing forms of representation as it is very risky for civil society activists to make representative claims that challenge the CCP's monopolistic claim to represent the Chinese population and interests. Traditional actors of representation – the CCP, at local level – do instrumentalise participation to boost their legitimacy by showcasing their responsiveness and smoothing policy-making. However, it is the third type of relationship between participation and representation, unveiled by Frenkiel and Tawa Lama Rewal,⁶² which captures the best what participation does to representation when PB is introduced in Wenling and Chengdu, where not everyone can participate: in Wenling, it lies in the “thickening” of the elites and the reconnection of People's Congress representatives with local residents through PB devices. The combination of popular and elite participation results especially in Congress representatives' empowerment in Xinhe. In Zeguo, through sortition, ordinary citizens get to directly take part in budget decisions, but over the years, the design has been modified to reestablish more elite participation. Local elites tend to be the ones who systematically gain access to the budget and decision making thanks to PB, which is the explicit objective of the PB design in Xinhe. Since in China local congress representatives (*renda daibiao*) are often devoid of power, and local congresses are rubber stamp institutions representing the Party more than citizens, local cadres are powerful but quite disconnected from popular needs. The absence of electoral representation entices them to respond above all to higher authorities and promotional standards, and does not prevent corruption by personal, family, clanic, private interests. The institutionalized village councils in Chengdu to some extent, but more importantly the *kentanbui* in Wenling – as emphasized in Li Fan's typology – give more clout to local congresses especially regarding budget issues, forcing local officials to respond more to the actual needs of the local population, if the newly empowered elites are more responsive to citizens' than to their own interests. It may give local governments arguments to reject extravagant (“face projects”) or disconnected projects imposed by their hierarchy. Experiments conducted in Zeguo in 2008, 2009 and 2010 deepened the logic of intermingling local People's Congress representatives with ordinary citizens' voice⁶³. This combination of random sampling of ordinary citizens with elite-led deliberation tends to significantly strengthen the elected representatives' legitimacy and power. In the context of the one party system, all elites are bound to have strong connection with the Party,⁶⁴ but elites are not fully monolithic and may have some interests in better responding to citizens' interests. Given our observations and interviews in Wenling, there is doubt however that this broadening of elites truly changes the balance of power and empowers the least privileged, especially migrant workers).⁶⁵

In Chengdu, PB takes place at a lower level (villages and urban communities) and the main outcome is rather the creation of a new layer of official representatives, which also interacts with the local People's Congress but more distantly.

Chengdu's village governance is an interesting case in the sense that the power of the elected village committee (*cunmin weiyuanhui*) has been partly transferred to the elected village council, which has been turned into a regular oversight and decision-making institution addressing significant issues such as how to use collective assets, allocate available financial resources, and set the boundaries of agricultural land to which households have use rights⁶⁶. The village committee representatives used to be no match for almighty party secretaries (*yibashou*) who

tended to hold on to their traditional monopolistic power. The regularly convened and tightly organized *yishihui* seem to allow participants to finally gain some of the former power of the Party secretary and even alleviate some of their dependence on township authorities which many village committees, could not overcome.⁶⁷ These residents among residents constantly interact and respond to their constituents-neighbours and their role is conceived as a mere conveyance of views and projects, which they embody – skilled and selected mediators voicing their neighbours’ grievances and expectations in an audible manner. This stabilized and strictly designed process is therefore changing the traditional Leninist and Maoist pattern of representation where the avant-garde constituted by CCP cadres is indispensable to the expression of the masses’ interests as the latter, even though sovereign, are supposedly not fully able to understand and express them themselves without the former. We may therefore wonder if some modest grassroots PB devices might represent a small but decisive step in the gradual formation of capable citizens finally able to express themselves without the filter of the Party.

Conclusion

This analysis of three Chinese PB practices through the lens of representation confirms the existence of a third relationship between participation and representation, which provides a rich and rewarding angle to compare different PB cases. In the Chinese case – where the CCP has the monopoly on representation, the few elected representatives have very limited power, and government is not monolithic but composed of many different layers – PB cannot be simply reduced to empowering civil society against established representatives or becoming an instrument of legitimization for established elites. In the three outstanding cases we investigated – which are not representative at all of Chinese local politics even though other similar experiments are conducted elsewhere – PB does contribute to opening the decision-making process to formerly excluded participants. But these participants are not exactly ordinary citizens. They are mostly elites – economic, intellectual, but also political (elected members of the People’s Congress, and village council representatives) who used to be excluded from crucial budget decisions. This process of “thickening of the elites” relies on transparency and opening of participation to more citizens, albeit in a manageable manner. A new distribution of power takes place, which mitigates the monopoly of power of the CCP at very low administrative level. It is positive in the sense that in the places where PB has been implemented, it is much harder for village and local party secretaries to make decisions behind closed doors.

In these non representative cases of PB introduction in China, PB has therefore contributed to making local politics more honest and responsive, by stifling the power of disconnected self-serving cadres, but also by empowering local cadres and elected representatives against predatory higher ups. As regards ordinary citizens, even in these radical experiments, they are still considered as lacking competence and their voice is filtered by new layers of representatives who are close to them and are endowed with a double legitimacy (input-electoral and output-mediation work). PB participants, who are identified as ordinary citizens, are empowered by the *yishihui* and *kentanbui*, under the strict control of the CCP (especially at central and provincial level), so as to efficiently put a check on unresponsive and self-serving lower and intermediary-level cadres and party secretaries and thereby safeguard the legitimacy of the overall one-party system. Further research is needed to explore the systematic relevance of investigating the impact

of participation on representation, starting with other Chinese PB cases, but also in the rest of the world, including in other online and offline participatory devices.

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² Sintomer et al. *Participatory budgeting in Europe* ; Sintomer et al. *Participatory budgeting worldwide*

³ Baiocchi and Ganuza “Participatory budgeting as if emancipation mattered”; Shah, “Participatory budgeting”

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⁹ Frenkiel & Tawa Lama Rewal, "The redistribution of representation through participation: Participatory budgeting in Chengdu and Delhi"

¹⁰ Frenkiel & Tawa Lama Rewal, *ibid.*

¹¹ Pitkin, *The concept of representation*, 209

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¹⁵ Sieyès, *Dire de l'Abbé Sieyès sur la question du veto royal*

¹⁶ Saward, "The representative claim"

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²² Ma, *ibid.*

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²⁴ Organic laws of 1987 and 1998 define the organization of village committees of 3 to 7 members elected according to universal suffrage every three years. The local congress and the electoral committee are the two other compulsory village institutions.

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²⁶ Li, "The development of participatory budgeting in China"

²⁷ Gao, "Democratic consultation gathered people", 30

²⁸ Document No 35, 12 June 2001

²⁹ Sun, *Contemporary Chinese Democratic Consultation Study*, 118

³⁰ The first open budget discussion took place in Wenqiao township in 2003 and Songmen township also opened its government budget in 2005. These *kentanbui* have been from then on irregular and manipulated by local governments, who rejected their binding nature. Lei, *China's governance model*.

³¹ Deliberative polling consists in recruiting a scientific random sample of the public and providing them with a first questionnaire and balanced briefing materials. On the day of face-to-face deliberation, participants engage in small and large group sessions to deliberate over policy alternatives, after which they are provided with a final questionnaire, which allows to identify informed public opinion on complex issues through discussion. Currently, there are more than

100 deliberative polling exercises in 28 countries. Fishkin et al., “Deliberative democracy in an unlikely place”

³² He, “Participatory Budgeting in China”

³³ He, “Deliberative participatory budgeting”

³⁴ Ye, “No money, no representation”

³⁵ Zeguo’s land revenue is high thanks to its developed economy and resulting prosperous land markets (land transfers and rentals)

³⁶ Fewsmith, “Taizhou area explores ways to improve local governance”

³⁷ Our investigation is under process and in this paper we only focus on village councils.

³⁸ At the prefectural level, the Chengdu Coordinated Urban-Rural Development Commission (CCURDC) is charged with coordinating the planning and development efforts of the prefecture, district, and county-level city commissions and bureaus dealing with urban planning, land management, urban and rural construction, agricultural development, transportation, water, environmental protection, human resources, health, education, and finance. These, in turn, coordinate planning at the town, village, street, office, and community levels.

³⁹ For instance, in 2011, peri-urban areas received 70% of the Chengdu’s total fiscal expenditures, while the nearby suburbs and the inner city respectively received 20% and 10% (Ye et al 2013). Resources are distributed according to a differentiated tier system. In first-tier (wealthy) areas, projects are funded by the local government. In second-tier areas like Pengzhou, the Chengdu government funds 50% and the local government pays the rest while in third-tier areas, Chengdu funds 70% of the total bill.

⁴⁰ This amount has increased every year. It amounted to 47,500USD in 2011 and 50,000USD (with a maximum of 85,000USD) in 2012 (Ming, “Participatory Budgeting, Rural Public Services and Pilot Local Democracy Reform”). More recently, allocated budgets have hovered between 400,000RMB and 800,000RMB (58,500USD-115,000USD).

⁴¹ Ming, “Participatory Budgeting”. It is all the more significant as the rural per capita annual disposable income in Chengdu still amounted to 18,605RMB (2,715USD) in 2016.

⁴² Cabannes and Ming, “Participatory budgeting at scale”

⁴³ The United Front work department is a CCP agency created during the civil war and reestablished under Deng Xiaoping which is in charge of managing relations with the non-Communist Party elite (including the eight minor parties, individuals and organizations holding social, commercial, or academic influence, or who represent important interest groups) both inside and outside China. Its role is currently being redefined but there are still branches at all administrative levels to guarantee CCP oversight over groups that are not directly associated with the Party and government.

⁴⁴ For the sake of brevity, the *modus operandi* of *cunmin yishihui* (village meetings) only is described. The council procedure supposedly now also applies to *jumin yishihui* as well. Besides, since the PB is based on Chengdu prefecture funding given to villagers to bridge the gap with urbanites and since budget issues differ considerably and are likely more controlled by cadres in much wealthier urban communities, the practice must diverge from the village one and needs further investigation.

⁴⁵ While local officials tend to put forward the improvement of the «quality» (*suzhi*) of participants, scholars like He Baogang highlight the questioning of the deliberative polling process and the gradual limitations to ordinary citizen participation. He, “Deliberative participatory budgeting”

⁴⁶ He, “Deliberative participatory budgeting”

⁴⁷ Fewsmith, *The logics and limits of political reform*

⁴⁸ Given the current national trend for the Party to decide for everything, further institutionalization now seems hardly plausible.

⁴⁹ Collins and Chan, “State capacity building in China”

⁵⁰ All sections of society are supposed to be consulted on major issues before and during policy-making processes. Consultative democracy has held greater sway since 2012 to justify the Party’s (traditional) claim to represent the whole of the Chinese people. To represent such a diverse and large population, which the Party started to officially recognize with Jiang Zemin’s theory of “the three represents”, it must not only organize consultation of the eight authorized non-communist parties (especially thanks to institutions such as the United Front), diverse political, economic, academic elites but also the common people (*laobaixing* or *qunzhong*, the masses). Frenkiel and Shpakovskaya, “The Evolution of Representative Claim-making”

⁵¹ Interview with Party cadres conducted in Wenling in 2014

⁵² In Nanchang, Jiangxi province and Haikou, Hainan province, the participation of all residents is on the contrary actively sought.

⁵³ Interview with local cadre, Chengdu, July 2016

⁵⁴ Houtzager and Gurza Lavalle, "Participatory Governance and the Challenge of Assumed Representation in Brazil"

⁵⁵ Manin, *Principles of representative government*

⁵⁶ The handpicking of skilled and cooperative residents in neighbourhood committees is also described in Read, *Roots of the state*

⁵⁷ Sintomer, « The meaning of representation »,

⁵⁸ Ming, « Large-scale participatory budgeting in Chengdu »

⁵⁹ He, « deliberative participatory budgeting »

⁶⁰ Arnstein, “A Ladder Of Citizen Participation”

⁶¹ Arendt, *The human condition*; Arendt, *On revolution*; Habermas, *The structural transformation of the public sphere*; Habermas, *Between facts and norms*; Carl Cassegard « Contestation and bracketing »

⁶² Frenkiel and Tawa Lama Rewal, « The redistribution of representation through participation »

⁶³ He, « Deliberative participatory budgeting »

⁶⁴ Dickson « Cooptation and corporatism in China »; Zhuang Meixi, “Social Accountability under Authoritarianism, Public supervision of local governments in China”

⁶⁵ In January 2020, I could however observe that elite migrants had been invited to take part in the discussions and formed the first small group, which was the only group deliberating in Mandarin and not in the local dialect. Their remarks and conclusions were also shared during the plenary session.

⁶⁶ Village committees are elected and have executive power to handle village affairs. In places like Chengdu where the village council, also translated as « village representative assembly » is institutionalized and regularly convened, oversight and horizontal accountability of elected village leaders improve significantly.

⁶⁷ Lily Tsai *Accountability without democracy*; O’Brien and Han “Path to democracy? Assessing village elections in China”; Read *Roots of the state*