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# ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND DEMOCRATIZATION IN CHINA: A PERSPECTIVE FROM CIVIL POLITICAL PARTICIPATION



Yang Wenxin Zhang<sup>1</sup>

Yanqing Jiang<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*School of Law, Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai, China*

<sup>2</sup>*School of Economics and Finance, Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai, China*

(+ Corresponding author)

## ABSTRACT

### Keywords

Economic development

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Petition

Microblog.

### JEL Classification:

Along with China's economic development since the reform and opening up, political participation of Chinese citizens has increased a great deal in a variety of forms. Elections are becoming increasingly formal and substantial and the number of petitions is getting larger and larger, which are institutionalized forms of political participation. In the forms of non-institutionalized political participation, communications between the mass and public officials have increased significantly, and even the general mass can participate in government decision-making, changing their positions from a passive role to a relatively active one.

**Contribution/ Originality:** This study contributes in the existing literature by providing a tentative discussion of the mutual relationship between economic development and the progress of democratization in the case of modern China.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

After the autocratic rule in Portugal ended in 1974, more and more research began to focus

on democratization in developing countries. In the surging waves of democratization, China, as a nation that has always been labeled “authoritarianism” or “neo-authoritarianism”<sup>1</sup>, is also confronted with such a problem. Hence, is there also a process of democratization in contemporary China?

After the Reform and Opening up, China has made an extraordinary achievement in economic development, which is acknowledged by all. Meanwhile, the relationship between economic development and political development has always been a hot issue in academic field. Thus, Has China also made a development in politics with the rapid economic development? Of course the modernization theory assume that economic development will ultimately cause democratization, which is supported by plenty of empirical researches<sup>2</sup>. But the author argues before we have clarified all the facts, we should not move to any theories.

Therefore, before we use modernization theory to analyze China, we should understand the fact first and examine the real development of democratization in China. Based on the above, this article is divided into three parts: the first part discusses what is democracy and what is democratization, and how to operate the concept “democratization in China”; the second part discusses the development of “democratization in China” from different dimensions, and use “political participation in microblog” as a typical case; the third part briefly concludes the article and reaches a conclusion.

## **2. DEMOCRATIZATION IN CHINA: THE DIMENTION OF PARTICIPATION**

### *2.1. What is Democracy and what is Democratization?*

Researches on democracy have a long history, and the meaning of the concept “democracy” has experienced a huge change from the beginning. The definition of this thick concept has always been in discussion, therefore, to some extent, different definitions of the concept caused different conclusions directly. We can even claim the reason for different conclusions among researches is towards a large extent due to different operations about democracy<sup>3</sup>. If we do not define it strictly, such an all-embracing data container<sup>4</sup> certainly cannot satisfy our demand to further the research, because we cannot operate and measure it.

Therefore, how many different definitions on democracy? According to Coppedge, there are thick concepts, with relatively more aspects; and thin concepts, with relatively less aspects.

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<sup>1</sup>William Joseph (2010).

<sup>2</sup>In 1960s, Lipset’s pathbreaking research concluded that there’s correlation between economic development and democracy. Later, Cutright and Wiley’s large-N research got the same conclusion, which argues that the level of political representation is related to the level of social development. Dahl proposed the concept “polyarchy” and through large-N research, concluded that nations with a certain level of economic development are more likely to be polyarchy. While Przeworski et al. doubted above conclusions through sophisticated methods, and argued democracy is easier to survive in rich nations, but they didn’t claim economic development promoted democratization. See Dahl (1971); Cutright and Wiley (n.d); Przeworski (2000).

<sup>3</sup>Coppedge (2012).

<sup>4</sup>Sartori (1970).

However, tracing back to history, we can discover the concept of democracy is becoming thinner and thinner<sup>5</sup>. Namely contemporary researches generally use thinner definitions, the meaning of which is relatively more explicit and clear. For example, Schumpeter's definition on democracy is a thin one: democracy is a political method, namely a certain form of institutional arrangement for making political decisions-legislative and administrative.<sup>6</sup> Schumpeter proposed the least definition on democracy, which means people have the right to attend the elections several years at a time. This is a typical thought of elitist democracy.

Similarly, Dahl's definition on democracy is relatively thinner. In Dahl's view, there are two dimensions of democracy: participation and contestation<sup>7</sup>. "Contestation captures the uncertain peaceful competition necessary for democratic rule, a principle that presumes the legitimacy of some opposition, the right to challenge incumbents, protection of the twin freedoms of expression and association, the existence of free and fair elections, and a consolidated political party system. Participation, on the other hand, captures the idea of popular sovereignty, which presumes the protection of the right to vote as well as the existence of universal suffrage. Dahl's viewpoint is also a elitist one, but he also emphasizes people's participation and the principle of popular sovereignty"<sup>8</sup>.

Besides, O'Donnell's definition is thicker, which includes more meaning than Dahl's. But his definition is not contradictory with Dahl's. Both definitions emphasize on some basic civil rights and the rights for participating in politics, and both definitions extend strict procedural definition. By contrast, Przeworski's definitions are more close to Dahl's. He argues that democracy has four key elements: equality, participation, representation and freedom. Przeworski highly emphasizes effective equal opportunities and conditions for political equality. He claims that democracy must guarantee effective civil rights<sup>9</sup>.

Above are some representative definitions on democracy, which are usually cited by contemporary scholars. Having clarified the definition on democracy, the definition on democratization is relatively simple and clear. Generally speaking, democratization refers to a process transforming to democracy. Researches in this field often focus on the process of establishment and consolidation of democracy as well as the reason, speed and process for a nation's transition to democracy. Since "the third wave", researches about democratization have been increasing and become a hot issue in academic field.

## *2.2. What is Democratization in China? A Perspective of Civil Political Participation*

After we have clarified all the definitions above, we can then move on to the next discussion: What is democratization in China and what are its unique features? It's not difficult to discover

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<sup>5</sup>Coppedge (2012).

<sup>6</sup>Tianshi (2013).

<sup>7</sup>Dahl, R.A., 1971.

<sup>8</sup>Todd (2003).

<sup>9</sup>Gerardo Munck (2011).

that the most representative definition is Dahl's "polyarchy" among all the definitions above. Other definitions are either the simplification or supplement or correction of his. As Coppedge has pointed out, since the publish of Dahl's Polyarchy, most of the researches about democracy and democratization has used the two dimensions proposed by Dahl, namely participation and contestation, when they tried to measure the concept, democracy. These researches either only use one of them or combine both of the two<sup>10</sup>. But in China, an authoritarian regime, there is no legitimate contestation<sup>11</sup>. Therefore, this research will try to operate the concept from the dimension of participation. What's more, if we can combine all the four typical definitions on democracy, we can discover the key point is the right for citizens to participate in politics, no matter the concept is thin or thick. That's why this research is going to discuss the situation of political participation in China to reflect the process of democratization in China. Then how many forms can people participate in politics? According to Verba, political participation is activities aiming at influencing political system, including voting, party elections, community services, contacting with government officers, taking part in political conferences and protests and communications, etc<sup>12</sup>. Thus, this research is going to discuss the situation of Chinese citizen's political participations since Reform and Opening up from the above aspects, and analyze a typical case, participating in politics by microblog, to make an more specific explanation about citizen's political participation.

### **3. CITIZENS' POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN CHINA: VOTING, PETITION AND COMMUNICATION**

#### *3.1. Voting for Deputies to the People's Congress*

The right to vote and run in local elections is a kind of basic rights, which should be included by various definitions on democracy. Schmpeter's minimum definition on democracy even only included the right to vote, namely people have the right to vote in elections held several years at a time. Therefore, examinations about the changes in people's voting can greatly reflect the changes in people's political participation. The system of people's congress is the fundamental political system in China, thus the right for citizens to vote can be shown on voting for deputies of people's congress at the primary level. Since Reform and Opening up, people's sense of participation and enthusiasm has been increasing rapidly. Three decades since Reform and Opening up saw the constantly reforming and refining of our electoral system and the quality of elections has been improving. The convening of the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Party marked the Chinese democratic political development has opened a new page. On July 1, 1979, the Second Session of the Fifth National People's Congress passed the People's Republic of China National People's Congress and Local People's Congress at all levels of the electoral law, which will expand direct elections by the township to the county level, and change a single candidate

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<sup>10</sup>Todd (2003).

<sup>11</sup>Coppedge (2012).

<sup>12</sup>Paik (n.d).

election into a competitive election. The election laws will also increase joint nominations in the election, and allow propaganda for candidates with a variety of legal means, as well as implement secret ballots. From 1982 to 2004, China's electoral law has been amended four times, narrowing the gap between urban and rural population proportion of every candidate, and clearly defined forms of publicity for candidates and limited the National People's Congress into less than 3,000 people, reduced deputies in all levels, simplified voters' registration process, recovered the pre-selection system and implemented competitive elections after pre-elections. After three decades of reform and development, China gradually achieved a substantial shift from formal elections to real elections, and elections gradually became a way to reflect the will and interest of citizens and evaluate leaders' performance and achieve a smooth turnover of power<sup>13</sup>.

Under such a change, citizen's enthusiasm for participation is also increasing. In the countryside, the "national rural elections" has gradually made such achievements: namely transitions from single place to all places, from assignments to elections, from single candidate elections to competitive elections, from indirect elections to direct elections. The average participation rate remained at around 80 percent, 'the Mass Election (direct elections that voters can recommend candidates with one man one vote) has become popular in the country.'<sup>14</sup>In the town, participation rate in direct elections is generally high, and elections are becoming more and more competitive and fierce. Shandong, Guangxi, Zhejiang and other places have carried out innovative election experiments, and have got successes<sup>15</sup>. Many grass-roots democracy related literatures pointed out that since the Reform and Opening up, electoral participation of our citizens has been greatly improved<sup>16</sup>.

### 3.2. *Petition*

Petition is a very unique form of political participation in China. According to the provisions of "Petition Regulations": "Petitions are citizens, legal persons or other organizations using letters, e-mail, fax, phone or visits, etc. to reflect suggestions, comments or complaints towards all levels of governments and governments above the county level to ask for resolutions by relevant administrative authorities according to law."<sup>17</sup>Thus, in the absence of legalized oppositions, petitions opened a channel for citizens to participate in politics and to express their dissatisfactions. This is an institutionalized form of political participation, which is a common way for citizens to propose political demands. In contemporary China, the importance of the petition system is self-evident. "In the construction of the nation's political transition period, it serves as a channel for resolving social conflicts, and its role is increasingly revealing and

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<sup>13</sup>Liping and Ran (2010).

<sup>14</sup>Guanghui and Dongshui (2010).

<sup>15</sup>Xiuhua (2008).

<sup>16</sup>Weimin (2005).

<sup>17</sup>Yong (2008).

becoming more and more indispensable." <sup>18</sup>Therefore, when discussing the political participation of citizens in China, the petition is a very important aspect. The author believes that discussions about petition may compensate Dahl's "opposition" dimension, which we didn't involve in this paper, and in this way we will have a more comprehensive understanding of democratization in China. Since the Reform and Opening up, petitions are also increasing. From the dimension of time, the data show that from the beginning of the early 1990s, the petition activity has increased significantly, with an average annual growth rate of 8 percent and reached an unprecedented 30 million petitioners in 2002. Besides, from the dimension of space, the frequency of petitions in the richer provinces (such as Shanghai, Zhejiang, etc.) has been increasing, and the frequency of petitions in poor western provinces such as Sichuan and Yunnan where petitions were rare before also began to increase<sup>19</sup>. In addition, Yu Jianrong's statistics also clearly show this trend, namely the frequency of petitions is increasing. "In 2003, the National Party petition department received a total of 127,213 people's (pieces) letters and visits, with an increase of 4.1% over the previous year, in which the central and state authorities accepted the petition of citizens rose 46 percent, the State Bureau for Petitions accepted the petition of citizens rose 14%; National party petition departments received a total of 315,000 times of collective petitions, namely 7.12 million people, which compared with last year, respectively increased by 41% and 44.8%.

In above statistics, collective petitions with more than 50 people a time has increased 33.3% compared to the last year, the number of people in a single collective petition has reached more than 800 people, which set a record with most people at one time to petition in Beijing. In the first quarter in 2004, the State Bureau for Petitions processed letters from citizens rose by 20.2% and received mass petition batches and number of people rose 99.4% and 94.9% respectively, compared to the last year. "<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the petition, as a channel for citizens to express their dissatisfaction, the increasing number of which may be caused by a variety of reasons, such as externalities, negative changes in the social structure and so on. However, no matter what the reason is, we can clearly see such an increase in political participation from the data. It reflected citizen's increasing will for expression and awareness of protecting their own rights, which is also an improvement on the sense of political participation.

### *3.3. Communication: Microblog Participation as an Example*

Since Reform and Opening up, people's enthusiasm to communicate with officials is also increasing. With the development of technology, channels for citizen's participation in politics have become more diverse. Emergence of the Internet has greatly broadened people's engagement and has attracted most of the people to participate in politics and such a convenient means of communication has built a bridge between "official" and "the people". For example, the microblog is such an online communication platform with a wide range of influence and an

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<sup>18</sup>Zhang, Zhang, Wang and Yin (2008).

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Paik (n.d).

involvement of more and more people. "According to a research report released by Analysis think tank, in 2009, the number of microblog registered users in China is only 800 million, while by 2011 and 2012 this number will reach 145 million and 240 million respectively. Such a growth speed can set a record in Internet application development in China. According to "China's Administration Microblog Report", released by Public Opinion and Communication Research Laboratory in Fudan University, up to the end of March 2011, a total number of administrative institutions' microblogs with real-name authentication is 1708 and the number of Chinese officials' microblogs is 720. "<sup>21</sup>Such an amazing number shows to us not only the huge impact of microblog in today's society, but also public officials' actions to learn from people and listen to voice of the people. And people are actively communicating with government officials, reflecting their feelings. Microblog is a quick channel to connect elites and mass. Microblog has a huge user base, which has a variety of voices so that it can quickly and easily connect officials and the public and convey information. "First of all, microblog can be more interactive and immediate, which can make communications between Internet-users and deputies more active and flexible ..... Secondly, microblog has a low threshold for access, which allows ordinary people to have access to get more discourse right and it's a powerful push for citizens to participate in politics. "<sup>22</sup>Such a communication means has many advantages and has played an important role. More and more people began to participate in the microblog interaction and make active discussions to express their own views. During the two sessions of 2010 and 2011, the use of microblog has become a main attraction. In the recent trial of Bo Xilai's case, the Jinan Intermediate People's Court is the first time using microblog to broadcast the entire trial process. And this innovation has been welcomed by the people. As far as the author have just seen, the number of microblog fans of "Jinan Intermediate People's Court" has reached 516, 520 (even if one person has registered two or more ID, this figure is also very impressive).And unlike commercial ID, "zombie fans" for such official microblogs seems rare). From such a representative form of modern communication, "political participation by microblogs", we can see the enthusiasm of the people to concern with political affairs has improved significantly.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In summary, since Reform and Opening up, Chinese citizens' political participation has increased a lot in a variety of forms. Elections are increasingly formal and substantial and number of petitions is larger and larger, which are institutionalized forms of political participation. In forms of non-institutionalized political participation, communications between mass and public officials has increased significantly, and even mass can participate in government decision-making, changing their positions from passive to active. From all these phenomena, we can see encouraging progresses: Since Reform and Opening up, China has made a great improvement in the process of democratization. Despite there are still many problems in the current forms of

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<sup>21</sup>Zhongliang and Yonghong (2012).

<sup>22</sup>Guangning (2011).

political participation, it is undeniable that the political participation of Chinese citizens has been greatly improved. As for the reason for such a progress, it is beyond the scope of this paper. But this is an issue worthy of study. In future works, we can continue to make researches about it.

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