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Original Research

CHINA: LOCAL GOVERNMENT
少数服从多数 (The Minority Obeys the Majority)

Dr. Peter Emerson[1]

1. Director, the de Borda Institute 34-6 Ballysillan Road Belfast BT14 7QQ Northern Ireland

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Correspondence
Author: Dr. Peter Emerson

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Abstract

Local democracy is a relatively recent but nevertheless key part of China's polity. While this study of many villages in several provinces in China has shown lots of differences from one village to another, it also suggests there are several similarities in the voting procedures used in China and the West, both in electoral systems and most definitely in decision-making. Indeed, Chinese rural democracy is structured in a way not dissimilar to that of many other countries, including those which describe, not only themselves as democratic, but also China as undemocratic. Furthermore, while both China and the West claim to be close to the democratic ideal, this detailed analysis suggests many decisions in both are unwisely based on dichotomies which, as often as not, are non-dualities. A more philosophical approach might argue that, just as Yīn and Yáng are not a duality, nor too are many of the supposed 'opposites' used elsewhere, not least those in conflict zones: "Are you Catholic or Protestant?" "Sunni or Shi'a?" "Hutu or Tutsi?" "Ukrainian or Russian?"

Keywords: Preferential voting; decision-making; electoral systems; consensus; non-duality.

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Introduction

Local government was introduced into China in the early 1980s, one of a number of initiatives to overcome the complete chaos caused by the horrors of both the Great Chinese Famine (1959-61) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). Millions died; maybe 20 million in the former man-made disaster, and another 1-2 million in the second.

While it is difficult to apportion credit to any one particular policy, there is no denying the fact that, in just 50-60 years, many provinces of China have progressed from being some of the most dangerous and anarchic societies in the world to, today, some of the safest. A few villages are still a little dilapidated, but many have been completely rebuilt with one- or two-storey houses; and the overall impression is that, while in any one rural settlement the houses are all very similar, rural poverty has been, not eliminated, but certainly much reduced.

The original intention, under President Hú Jǐntāo 胡锦涛 (2003-13), was to extend the practice of elections to China's towns and cities, but this development was scrapped by his successor, Xi Jinping 习近平，(2013-).

Today, then, nearly every village is served by a (sometimes brand new) council office, fully equipped with computers and so on; all duly marked by the national flag outside. Each has a committee consisting of a secretary *shūji* 书记, a leader *cūnzhǎng* 村长, a deputy *fùcūnzhǎng* 副村长 and a few committee members – the exact number varying according to the size of the village. Sometimes, there is a little confusion as to who of the first two officials is in overall charge… but none at all, of course, as sometimes happens, when the two posts are combined!

Some village functions are controlled centrally – for example, every provincial authority holds its elections on the same day, once every five years – while other functions are devolved, so the village, it seems, may choose its own electoral laws. Some very small villages with all the facilities for self-rule – a fully equipped office, and so on – are nevertheless run by a larger village nearby; such was the case in Legs 13 and 14. In general, and in theory, candidates may be self-selected, but information on certain details – the total number of candidates standing; whether all the villagers are eligible to vote (as happens in some elections) or just the party members; the percentage turnout; and whether or not non-party members are eligible to stand and for which posts – was not always sought and invariably a little difficult to ascertain.

Voting Theory

It seems there is a tendency in many countries to assume that, if a decision has been reached as a result of a vote, that then the decision is fair… regardless of the voting procedure used. This certainly applies to village councils in China, but it is also true of other societies elsewhere, not least in the author's own home town of Belfast. Consider, however, the scenario in which 15 voters are debating four options – ***A, B, C*** and ***D*** – with the following 1^{st}-2^{nd}-3^{rd}-4^{th} preferences: 6 like ***A-D-C-B***, 4 want ***B-C-D-A***; 3 choose ***C-D-B-A*** and 2 prefer ***D-C-B-A***. On analysis, the 'democratic decision' of the 15 voters varies:

+ with **plurality voting**, as in a British or Indian first-past-the-post FPTP election,

the result is ***A***-6, ***B***-4, ***C***-3, ***D***-2,

so the winner is option ***A*** on a score of 6 – it's not a majority, just the largest minority;

or

+ in a **two-round system** as in a French election, the final scores are ***B***-9, ***A***-6 so the winner is

option ***B*** on a score of 9, which is a majority;

or

+ with an **alternative vote AV** as in an Australian election, the results are

A-6, ***B***-4, ***C***-3, ***D***-2

A-6, ***B***-4, ***C***-5

A-6, ***C***-9

so the winner is option ***C*** on a score of 9, which is also a majority – but a different one***;***

or

+ in a **Borda points system**, BC, as in ethnic votes in Slovenia, the results are

D-43, ***C***-42, ***A***-33, ***B***-32,

so the winner is now option ***D*** on a score of 43.

The outcome, then, the 'totally democratic choice' of the 15 voters in this (and many another) voters' profile, is either ***A*** or ***B*** or ***C*** or ***D***; it all depends on the voting system used, yet these four systems are all considered by many to be totally democratic, not least in the UK, France, Australia and Slovenia respectively. The same is true in China: generally speaking, if a vote has been held, those concerned then consider that the outcome is fair.

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THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The author is in his 80s. Mindful of the problems of Climate Change, he travelled from province to province, occasionally by bus but more often by train, and then visited one or more villages on his little fold-up bicycle. On one occasion in Guǎngdōng, when met by a few very elderly residents, he was simply waved away. Usually, however, the arrival of this 'old boy' on his little bike created a happy element of surprise – the word of welcome was

often a 'good-for-you,' *lìhai* 厉害 – which all helped to develop an atmosphere of friendly companionship; indeed, on three separate occasions, it included an invitation to lunch. To maintain this informality, the author never took notes during the interviews, and his research relied entirely on memory. Unfortunately, in some instances, he forgot to note the name of the village.

As often happened, questions were asked as to the purpose and/or authorisation of the author's visit, in which case reference was made to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, CASS, **中国社会科学院**. The latter had already accepted the author's on-line contributions in its three previous 'annual' *International Forums on Democracy*, and the author now hoped to participate in person in its fourth, originally planned for Běijīng **北京**in March 2025 or thereabouts – and hence his arrival in China in January 2025. Alas, the forum was then postponed, it seems indefinitely, and at the time of writing, has still to be re-scheduled.

On reflection, it is probably fair to say that this CASS invitation made the research possible, for formal permission from the relevant authorities in Beijing would probably not have been granted. Indeed, in some villages, a conversation became possible, only when reference was made to the CASS.

The Interviews

On his arrival in yet another village, the author would ask a local resident for the location of the village council offices, and there try to meet either the council leader, his/her deputy, or at least one or more members of the village committee. Given the limitations of the author's knowledge of Mandarin, resort was often made to a mobile phone and/or computer equipped with a translation app; that or, if the committee included an English speaker, the latter alone would be involved; this happened on Legs 7 and 8, for example, where in two villages - Běi Lài Cūn**北**赉村 and Fēng Lì Cūn风立村 – the provincial authorities were assisting the relevant local council by employing in each a well-educated development officer from elsewhere.

On many occasions, the authors' questions were maybe too invasive, and/or the subject matter too sensitive; in which case, he concluded the conversation, perhaps a little prematurely. In one instance in Leg 14, however, the atmosphere was not at all good, and the discussion came to an abrupt halt, despite or because of the presence (by telephone) of the chairperson's bi-lingual wife. In another, in Leg 2, a committee member or employee refused to even talk! It should also be noted that there was often a certain blandness in many of the answers – 'we always select the best candidates,' 'inter-ethnic relations are very

fraternal,' and so on. On some other occasions, certain questions were just not answered, and really 'sensitive' questions not even asked.

FINDINGS

Elections

Electoral systems vary, from one country to another. (Emerson 2019: 39 et seq., and '22: 50-58.) Indeed, they often differ from one democracy to another, if not even within any one country[1]. As mentioned above (para 1.5), there is nevertheless a common belief in the notion that, no matter what electoral system is used, the result is always fair. A change in the counting procedure, however, might produce quite different results.[2]

China's local council elections also vary. As noted above, the provincial authority chooses the date, but other details are decided by the village itself or, as in Legs 14 and 15, by a larger village nearby acting on its behalf. Needless to say, where the population is 2,000 or more, the villages often have a comparatively large committee, of 7 or more members; the smaller ones tend to have only 5 members. (As happens in many countries), the number involved is invariably uneven, so to ensure, no doubt, that a majority is nearly always probable.

It seems that in most but not all cases, the village elects all the committee members. Election turnout figures were rarely sought and never obtained. Instead, the author sometimes asked his interlocutors whether or not they had voted, but even the police officers mentioned in Leg 4 gave a negative answer.

The electoral system is sometimes though rarely binary. In one village council on Leg 10, the leader was not elected at all, but was appointed on passing an examination. Sometimes, a newly-elected leader, who shall always be a party member, chooses the other members – (like a British Prime Minister, re-shuffling 'his' or 'her' cabinet). In other village councils, each committee member was elected in turn (as happens in many western annual general meetings AGMs, where those concerned elect a chair, a secretary, and so on, one after the other), as was the case in Yáng Zhèng Cūn杨正村 in Yúnnán.

In most councils, it seems, the electoral system is a plurality vote or FPTP, with each voter choosing just one candidate; in some instances, approval voting is used, every villager 'approving' a set number of candidates, often three, and those who get the highest number of 'approvals' are then deemed elected; and in one instance in Leg 14, when some of the voters

considered that one of those elected had failed to fulfil his duties adequately, the village of Wǔjiāzhuāngcūn 武家庄村 was able to hold a recall election.

In those villages where ethnicities may be mixed, a form of proportionality may be used; as far as could be ascertained, this involved the election of one or two from one ethnicity, followed by the election of another one or few from another ethnicity, and so on, until a full committee was established. This happened in Leg 13, for example, where in a village of about 1,000 families and 4,000 adults, the local council included persons from seven different ethnicities, none of which had a majority, but all were represented proportionally, albeit approximately, on the local committee of 11 members, said the secretary, himself a member of the Huízú 回族minority.

Another complication arose where it had been decided that the council leader (and maybe other officials too, the deputy leader and/or the secretary) had to be a party member. Furthermore, as noted earlier（para 1.4）, in some village elections, the electorate might also vary: sometimes party members only; in other contests, everybody. It was often difficult to establish the number(s) of candidates involved in various elections and turnout figures, though not always sought, were never disclosed. Indeed, on one occasion in Leg 4, when asked by what margin he had been elected, a council leader replied, "That's a secret."

Decision-making

In stark contrast, decision-making does not vary, hardly at all. Whether the decision is taken in committee or in a village public meeting, the guiding principle – (as quoted in the title of this article: 少数 服从 多数, *shǎo shù fú cóng duō shù,* the minority obeys the majority) – is one of majority rule. Just as it is in the West.

"So we're the same," the author often quipped. Well not exactly; but in their respective Congresses, both China and America use binary voting and, in their understanding of voting theory, both sets of politicians and academics are often, and maybe even equally, unfamiliar. This observation, however – the reference to the similarity of the two polities – invariably meant that conversations finished on an amicable note.

Conclusion

Elections

There are over 300 electoral systems in the world. Some are very simple and rather inaccurate; some are more inclusive; and a few are precise. The most simple, binary voting, is the most primitive system, and it is used regularly only in North Korea. Plurality voting or FPTP is better and, as noted above, is often deployed in China as well as in India, the UK and the USA for example. As an electoral system, it is loaded towards a one- or two-party state and what George Washington described as a "…frightful despotism." (His farewell address in 1796.) Furthermore, the adoption of FPTP in the 19th Century in the UK was

"shaped throughout by the needs and interests of the party leaders, and settled, symbolically, in a private inter-party conclave." (Bogdanor 1981: 113).

It would be better, therefore, in such documents as the UN Charter, if democracy were more exactly defined: the best decision-making system, this paper would argue (see below), is preferential, and dichotomies should only be posed when the two options are a duality; while the best electoral systems relate to the election of at least two persons – both a president *and* a vice, for example – and are both proportional and preferential.

Decision-making

In contrast to the hundreds of electoral systems, there are only a dozen or so decision-making voting systems currently in use in at least one country. Both China and other countries talk of consensus and, to this end, the underlying ethos of the Chinese Communist Party CCP is "the often-stated desire... to aim for consensus before implementing a solution, rather than imposing one before this consensus has been reached, which might cause disharmony and conflict," (Brown 2011: 77). Abroad, however, some talk of consensus and majority voting, as if the two did not contradict each other, and only the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, UNFCCC's annual COP gatherings – Conferences of the Parties – have accepted that, on any one topic, the consensus of up to 200 countries cannot best be achieved in a majority vote.[3]

Of all these methodologies, binary voting is probably the most primitive and inaccurate… and yet it is ubiquitous. It was first used by the ancient Greeks, some 2,500 years ago, and then, a couple of centuries later, by the Chinese of the Former Hàn Dynasty (Wang, 1968: 176–7). Today, it is used in democracies everywhere, often with disastrous results. "All the wars in the former Yugoslavia started with a referendum," (*Oslobodjenje*, Sarajevo's famous newspaper, 7.2.1999), and the same is now true of the conflict in Ukraine. The genocide in Rwanda was also initiated by a belief in the 'rights of the majority' – "*Rubanda nyamwinshi*, (we are the majority)," was the war cry of the *Interahamwe*, (Prunier, 1995: 183). Majority voting is also used in theocracies like Iran, which became an Islamic Republic in a binary referendum in 1979; and a majority vote was the basis of bolshevism in the USSR, where the very word 'Bolshevik' (*Большевик*) means 'member of the majority' – even though they never achieved that description.[4]

Given the obvious inadequacies of binary ballots in any dispute involving more than two options, a second methodology – plurality voting – was devised by Pliny the Younger in the year 105. Alas, it was not used by a serving government until the year 1197, when the Chinese Jīn Dynasty （金朝）was confronted by the threat of war with Mongolia. There were three options 'on the table' – (i) war, (ii) an alternating policy, and (iii) peace – and the last-named won by 5:33:46 (Franke & Twitchett, 1994, p 266). (So peace it was, but alas,

not for long; in 1206, a *Khuriltai*, the traditional gathering of the Mongol nobles, elected Chinggis Khan.)

Logically, the most egalitarian decision-making methodology – the modified Borda count MBC – is non-majoritarian. Normally from a shortlist of about six options, it can identify the option with the highest average preference – and an average, of course, involves *every* voter, not just a majority of them! The MBC is inclusive, literally; it is also a most accurate voting analysis. It was devised in 1770 by Jean-Charles de Borda in pre-revolutionary France; it was however rejected by the 'democratic dictator', Napoléon Bonaparte, when he became *l'empereur* in a binary, majority vote referendum, in 1803.

General

Overall, while the theory may be fine, Chinese local government in practice is confined to the relatively minor decisions. If the capital, or maybe just the provincial authority decides, a new road is to be built, a new railway to be laid, a new airport to be constructed, or whatever, then that central decision takes priority. Indeed, in one village in Shāndōng, Leg 11, every house had just been demolished, and only the village shop remained intact; the nearby city, Liáochéng, had decided to create yet another industrial zone. Furthermore, a neighbouring village just a little further from the city knew not what its long-term future would be.

In some villages, then, there are all the trappings of local governance, but not too much action; as a consequence, there are sometimes more workers than there is work to be done, and the working hours are sometimes a little flexible, with lunch 'hours' sometimes exceeding 60 minutes and in one settlement in leg 6, the author gave up waiting when the clock ticked past 120…

Thirdly, both in elections and in decision-making, local government in China (and in other countries), could be improved enormously if it were to dismiss 'western' and now universal standards of majority rule and adopt a more inclusive politics, such as may be achieved with preferential voting procedures. Decision-making in western democracies is invariably very binary, with amendments adopted and motions approved, all subject to majority votes. In such scenarios, a chairperson can sometimes exercise excessive control, and decisions may sometimes depend, less upon the preferences of the voters, and more on the (chair's) order of voting and the voting system used (para 1.5).

In essence, in multi-option debates, binary ballots are often inadequate, and decisions taken in this way can be (and often are) manipulated. Furthermore, while in the West binary questions are considered the norm – "Are you Protestant or Catholic?" "Serb or Croat?" – others elsewhere have a different point-of-view: "the non-duality of right and wrong is a state of a buddha," was how Longchenpa put it, a Buddhist monk of the Nyingma tradition. **(**Klieger, 2021, 126.) The Ukrainian and the Russian are both Slav and in the main, both Christians, so to ask, in effect, "Are you Russian or Ukrainian?" as in Crimea, Donetsk and Luhansk, was also not a duality; it was a nonsense, as would be, for example, a vote in

China between Yīn and Yáng. In like manner, communism and capitalism also have their similarities: both are creeds based on greed and the exploitation of nature for the gratification of current generations; yet this question threatened the survival of our species during the Cold War, and is now being used again.

Democracy, however, is for everybody, not just a/the majority – and this is especially true in a land of 56 minorities. As in a two-party state, and certainly as in a one-party state, the question of how decision-making can be devolved in a polity of 'democratic centralism' – a phrase no different from one of Theresa May's favourite expressions, 'democratic leadership'– remains an unsolved conundrum.

World Peace

As the year 2025 draws to a close, the threat of Climate Change looms large. That people should be fighting wars at this time, with arsenals sometimes equipped with nuclear weapons, is an unqualified madness exacerbating our collective ecocide and suicide!

This insanity is often underlined by the facts that both sides are at fault, as for example with Hamas and Israel, both committing atrocities, often against innocent civilians; or with Russia and Ukraine, that both opponents share the same ethnicity, language group and Christian religion; or that both China and the United States, while arguing passionately about their different (economies and) polities, are in fact so remarkably similar. May this article help, albeit in small measure, to increase the mutual understanding of these two nuclear powers, at least to avoid any armed conflict, at best to promote disarmament and ensure the long-term survival of our species.

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