

From Village Election to Village Deliberation in Rural China: Case Study of a Deliberative Democracy Experiment

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Abstract Village democracy in China has expanded from village elections to the institution of village deliberation. This transformation would necessarily involve a number of trial studies on village deliberation. The paper examines one village deliberative democracy experiment in Bianyu village, Wenling city, Zhejiang Province. It provides a basic background to Bianyu village, discusses the design of the experiment, and examines its outcomes. The paper concludes with an assessment of the prospects for village deliberative democracy in rural China.

Keywords Social Conflicts · Village Elections · Village Deliberation · Deliberative Democracy · Local Governance

The Problem and the Introduction of Village Deliberative Democracy

In recent years social conflicts and disputes have become a frequent occurrence in rural China, particularly over matters such as land requisitioning, the erosion of collective village assets, the lack of transparency in regards to village finances, including embezzlement and corruption, and environmental pollution. Conflicts occur at village, township and even county levels. These are often caused by the failure of local government at any one of these levels to take seriously the interests and rights of farmers. Government requisition of farmland is mostly by means of coercion and farmers receive very little in the way of financial compensation [1]. Private enterprise also has little regard for environment costs. In order to guarantee a rise in the rate of GDP, government leaders in certain regions pay no attention at all to the pollution of farmland, rivers, and the atmosphere. This puts lives and the health of villagers at serious risk.

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The constant growth in wealth is another important social and historical factor increasing the amount of conflict in rural China. Over the last 10 years, and more recently, rapid economic development has clearly led to an increase in personal and household income for many villages. Income invested in and generated from urbanization projects and land rentals, for instance, has dramatically increased. However, where government administrations at all levels have greatly increased public investment in the countryside, problems have arisen over the control and use of funds. The manner in which funds are allocated or invested is the most challenging issue in many villages. This raises the importance of the need for villagers to develop an understanding of the idea of “democratic decision-making, management and supervision” [2]. Such a goal is, however, unattainable in the current form of village elections.

Undeniably, instituting villager self-government has endowed villagers with certain voting rights. In many villages, those over the age of 18 have gained the right to vote under a “one citizen one vote” policy in elections for the members of Village Committees [3, 4]. Although village electoral procedures have become increasingly systematic and standardized, village democracy still varies hugely in practice. In some places, villagers still have no way to participate in democratic management, in decision making, or in the supervision of rural public affairs. Although the members and directors of Village Committees are elected by villagers, they do not solicit villagers’ opinions as part of the democratic decision-making process. Village public affairs and resource distribution continues to be ruled by an elitist minority. It remains an incomplete or imperfect democracy insofar as other democratic measures are meagre and rural problems go unresolved.

In the above context, Björn Alpermann claims that more research is needed to identify the effects of post-election procedures on village governance, and raises the question of whether or not procedural rules for village representative assemblies affect participation in decision-making [5]. In a similar vein, Kevin O’Brien and Rongbin Han (2009) point out that the focus on village elections needs to shift from procedures to the broader political and social context [6]. Following Alpermann, O’Brien and Han, I argue that village democracy needs to expand from village elections to the institution of village deliberation. This transformation would necessarily involve a number of trial studies of village deliberation, and it requires the study of village deliberation.

Village deliberation could be an effective way of deepening and strengthening village democracy. Village deliberation would allow village problems to be resolved more smoothly than current means, and avoid dragging issues through unnecessary social conflict. The introduction of village deliberative democracy may help villagers to realize their basic rights, promote the construction of rural democracy based on villager self-government, expand the meaning of democracy in the minds of villagers and cadres alike, and thereby improve the prospect for rural democracy in village life generally [7].

The 2005 National Survey provided some indications as to the uneven penetration of village-level democratic institutions that we might expect to generate the need for deliberation.¹ In all, over 3,000 respondents took part in the survey. Ten percent of the respondents (298) reported that decisions on schools and roads in their town or city over the last 3 years were decided by *an all-villagers’ meeting* attended by each

¹ cf. Lilly Tsai [8]

household. By contrast, 616 (20.7 %) said these decisions had been made by *village representative meetings*, and 744 (25 %) by villager leaders. The largest fraction—1,318 (44.3 %)—were not sure. The same survey also found that 547 respondents (18.8 %) reported that decisions regarding village land contracts were made by an all-villagers' meeting; 524 (18 %) by village representatives; 650 (22.3 %) by village leaders; while 1,192 (40.9 %) were not sure. It found that 28.3 % reported that their villages held two village representative meetings in 2004, while 59.3 % were unsure [9]. Such findings indicate that penetration of deliberative devices such as the all-villagers' meeting is at least broad enough for demonstrative effects in civil governance, and probably broad enough to begin to alter the working practices and procedures of the 3.2 million village officials in the 734,700 villages in China.²

Villagers in rural China are paying increased attention to village finances, especially the financial incentives on offer. This could be a key force driving the need for village deliberative democracy and participatory budgeting [10]. However, pressure for village deliberative democracy also derives from a mix of other socio-political factors such as the “rightful resistance” movement, by which villagers use official laws to challenge local governments’ policy [11]; the government initiation of “building a harmonious society”; the need to carry out institutional reform and innovation; and the mechanisms of competition among regional leaders. Since China’s opening up, ever more information is coming in from the outside, instilling a firm sense of social, political, and economic rejuvenation that in turn has led to cadre intellectualization. For instance, cadres are taking a greater interest in what is happening overseas, and in some instances are furthering their education by undertaking study experience abroad. This combination of factors has enhanced the capability of cadres, especially encouraging those who are involved in government leadership to test and try new forms of deliberative governance such as the device of deliberation [12].

How feasible, though, is deliberative democracy as an institution in rural China? We sought to answer this question through trials, initially by identifying a village that would introduce deliberative procedures and mechanisms. We talked the idea to government officials in Wenling and received the support of Jiang Zhaohua, the Party Secretary of Zheguo town, and Zhu Wenjiang, the Party Secretary of Bianyu village, for the initial trial in 2006. Prior to our arrival, the villagers had held a number of meetings over issues arising from the rapid economic and social transformations that had already recently occurred in the village. We made it clear that our agenda was to help them to improve these village roundtables by modelling them on the idea of deliberative democracy. Far from imposing a foreign orthodox form of democracy on the villagers, our first goal as scholars, from the outside looking in, was to facilitate a better form of deliberation based on our knowledge and our experience of existing forms of village heart-to-heart talk. Our ultimate hope was that this would eventually lead to an organic institutionalization of deliberation in the village.

We redesigned the roundtables by refining and implementing more concrete procedures and incorporating deliberative polling methods. This was carried out in three stages. First, we laid down the rules as to the basic requirements of deliberative democracy. These are respect, openness, equality and representation. Secondly, we designed public opinion questionnaires for them and guided them through the

² *Ibid.*

administration side of things. Thirdly, we trained school teachers as facilitators for small-group panel discussions. It was important that we maintained our neutrality on the issues disputed in order to gain the trust and respect of the local cadres and village citizens.

The paper examines the village deliberative democracy experiment in five sections: section one has discussed the need for village deliberation, addressing a set of social issues and conflicts; section two provides a basic background to Bianyu village; section three discusses the design of the experiment; section four examines the outcomes of the experiment; and section five addresses its limitations. In the conclusion we assess the prospects for village deliberative democracy in rural China.

It should be noted that Bianyu is not a “demonstration” village designed by the local government, but the selection of it may carry with it a level of bias. While Bianyu’s experiment does not represent most villages in China, many other villages do hold regular village deliberative meetings.

Basic Situation of the Bianyu Village

As a suburb on the outskirts of Zheguo Township in Wenling City, by 2005 Bianyu village had undergone dramatic changes, with a great number of firms setting up factories there. Land rental had become the main source of Bianyu’s collective income. In 2005 the gross income of Bainyu was 1,735,000 Yuan, of which the rental income accounted for 92.2 % (1,600,000 Yuan). Consequently, the majority of its original inhabitants were now no longer engaged in agricultural production.

By 2005 over 3,000 people had moved to Bianyu, surpassing the population of registered inhabitants. The large influx of the new village population meant that housing rentals now accounted for some 10 % of each village household’s income. In 2005 the total village per capita annual income was as high as 9,800 Yuan, far exceeding not only the national average income of 3,200 Yuan per rural inhabitant, but Zhejiang’s average of 5,600 Yuan. Of the average per capita income of 9,800 Yuan in 2005, income sourced from the production of recycled scrap metal accounted for 20 %, income from start-up businesses accounted for 20 %, and income from the service industry was 30 %. The building and manufacturing sector accounted for 10 %, house rental income 10 %, and other income 6 %. The degree of non-agricultural production was high, as was the differentiation of villager occupations and income.

Accelerated industrialization has caused many problems in both rural and suburban China. In Bianyu’s case, the level of village infrastructure and social management simply could not keep up with the influx of new locals. It had seen social disorder between locals and migrants, health concerns arising from environmental negligence, and birth control management had become a major issue. Of these, the most pressing concern for villagers was environmental pollution, especially in relation to garbage disposal and river contamination that affected their everyday life and health. As the public issue most urgently in need of resolution, it tested not only the workability of the elected village committee and even that of the role accredited to town cadres, but the functioning of the village as a whole, including the new arrivals, extending even to enterprise investors and administrators beyond the village.

Three factors were crucial in Bianyu Village's leaders acceding to us carrying out the research trials there: (1) Various disputes had escalated not only between past and present village leaders, but also among the villagers themselves, which were cause for great concern. Some issues were highly delicate and in urgent need of resolution. Of particular concern, for instance, was the issue of centralized control of the new population. If a decision was left to the leaders to the exclusion of villager support, the issue would remain largely unresolved and foment increasing hostility and resentment. In this context, village leaders were attempting to settle disputes through village deliberation in the form of roundtable talks; (2) Mistrust gradually spread among the villagers concerning the leasing arrangements of land to the many firms establishing factory workshops in the village. The suspicion was that business representatives from these firms attempted to buy off village leaders to obtain cheap deals and shore-up the lease against competitors. The onus was on village leaders to ask questions regarding the lease of land during public discussion. With our assistance, roundtable talks would be more open to public scrutiny. Decisions arising from the talks would then not only help to reverse the public perception of corruption, but also strengthen the hand of village leaders in negotiations with the firms; (3) Village negotiation was a strong tradition in Bianyu because it historically constituted a number of different clans holding local power. The roundtable talks held prior to our arrival were a modern development of older forms of negotiation. Village leaders were quick to support us because our democratic model was not an insurmountable transition from the village tradition, especially the suggested roundtable talks. As a more open forum, democratic practice would not only enhance the quality, but also the legitimacy of the roundtable talks in the minds of the village leaders and the public.

The Deliberative Democracy Experiment at Bianyu Village

Different types of deliberation can and do occur. Ideally, deliberation is consultatively empowered. However, it is sometimes manipulative or symbolic. “Manipulative deliberation” disempowers citizens: we often witness this form of deliberation in instances of top-down propaganda. While it occurs in China, in the authoritarian regimes of other countries, and occasionally in even democratic nations, it is an entirely spurious form of deliberation. “Symbolic deliberation” is not much better. In China it is often used for political show: an opportunity, for instance, for officials to teach people the “correct” line of thinking over policies or a certain issue [13]. Still, consultatively empowered forms of public deliberation are taking place in China, and they indeed provide villagers with an opportunity to influence village policies and village decision-making processes. Development might be gradual and intermittent, but the increase in the instances and quality of village deliberation in the last decade bodes well for the future.

While broad data are not available, some rural areas in China display an impressive array of deliberative devices. Wenling, a county-level city, is one such place. With a population now exceeding one million, it has been implementing a form of democracy that combines popular representation with deliberation [14]. From 1996 to 2000 Wenling City held at least 1,190 deliberative and consultative meetings. A further

190 meetings were held across the city's towns, and 150 meetings occurred across governmental organizations, schools, and business sectors in Wenling.

Deliberative polling uses random sampling in order to constitute small bodies of ordinary citizens (typically a few hundred) as representatives of different population strata. These bodies engage issues through a facilitated process. They are supplied with all the relevant information around an issue and then deliberate on it, typically over a period of 1 or 2 days. The results at the end of the process are intended to represent considered public opinion. A case in point is the Wenling township of Zeguo, where in 2005 officials introduced deliberative polling as a mechanism with which to set priorities for the township's budget. The outcome of that deliberative poll elevated the decision-making process from its usual advisory status in the upper echelons of the town to an empowered status for all its citizens. It prompted officials to abide by the outcome and commit to advanced processes of deliberation for future decisions [15]. By 2006, the following year, ten out of 12 projects chosen through deliberative polling were implemented. Since then, deliberation has continued to evolve as a productive mechanism for the town's decision-making. During 2008–13, in the months February–March each year, deliberations were held in which every detail of the town's annual budget was made known to participants.

Empowered deliberation may be slow to evolve in China, but in towns such as Zheguo it has at least been secured through a set of procedural rules. Significantly, this is what sets it apart from manipulative or symbolic deliberation, discussed above. Its rules and procedures call for a meeting that ensures fairness, equality and deliberation carried through to its completion. Although similar qualities are implied in the set of rules and procedures outlined in the State Council's official documents on consultative and deliberative meetings, they are subsumed under broad strokes rather than enforced as rules. Nonetheless, the rules and procedures of the State Council do underlie key aspects of empowered deliberation. The documents stipulate that all participants at the outset of a meeting be presented with the pros and cons of an argument by the organizers, or that the participants themselves prepare and present both sides of an argument. Arguments in favour of a particular course of action should be presented first, followed by arguments that are against it. It is the facilitators' duty to sum up the differences and similarities of the arguments and to lead debate. If the government does not adopt or endorse a particular opinion or policy it must list all of the reasons why it chooses not to do so, supplying evidence to support its decision. Finally, the documents typically advise that one ought to have faith in deliberation as it will help to find the right balance or solution even where conflicts of interest over public policy appear unresolvable.³

In the previous section we discussed the types of issues in Bianyu village that lead their embracing deliberative democracy experiments. The rapid change that had been taking place in Bianyu forced its occupants into roundtable talks. Population growth and many other factors had pressured village leaders into quick solutions through manipulative or symbolic forms of deliberation. While they met the State's criteria for consultative meetings, there were obvious shortcomings in its deliberative procedures, namely representativeness, equality, independence, as well as in the debating skills and abilities of the participants. Most apparent was that only elected village

³ I was invited to a closed door meeting to discuss these documents in 2010 in Beijing.

representatives were able to attend the roundtable meetings. Village migrants and other disadvantaged groups were not only underrepresented; they were excluded from the meetings altogether. In order to push the roundtables in the direction of deliberative democracy we amended this proscription and introduced some new elements and methods of deliberative democracy.

Villagers and cadres proposed agendas for the democratic roundtables: issues to be addressed included administering the migrant population; the Three Year Plan for the village; environment and sanitation issues; and afforestation. As it was impossible for all four issues to be addressed in one meeting, we settled for a series of four roundtables.

As no provision had been made for the representation of migrant workers in the meetings, even though their population outnumbered that of the villagers, our first task was to redesign the procedures of the roundtables to accommodate all members of the village, including other disadvantaged groups. Although we were careful not to step on toes and undermine the rules and procedures already in place a degree of tenacity was required to underscore the importance of representation, especially given that migration was the first topic on the agenda. This we achieved by convincing the leaders of the crucial role random sampling has to play in deliberation. As can be seen in the table below, in our first deliberative meeting we included members from the newly arrived workers and members from the disadvantaged families in the village in the sample. We used a random sampling mechanism in the village to select participants from each of the categories in Table 1. Eighty-five participants in total were chosen for our sample. We provided the information on this sample under other categories in Table 2. This gave us a good mix of groups across the different social status in both the registered household population and new migrant population of the village. We endeavoured to instil in this and other meetings we facilitated a strong sense of equality among the participants. Importantly, as part of this attempt we referred to migrants as “new villagers” in place of the colloquial term “non-native.” Later we will be able to give a more detailed analysis as to whether they were treated equally by native villagers and others.

To ensure as far as possible that participants had equal opportunities to speak and equal access to information, we trained moderators on how to facilitate discussions and make all the necessary information available to participants. To ensure neutrality we recruited moderators from outside the village. In addition to this, moderators were required to meet the following conditions: (1) possess strong organizational skills and an ability to control live discussions; (2) have a reasonably high level of education; (3)

Table 1 Distribution of the participants

Villager delegates	Villagers	Women	Youth league	Members of association for the aged	Entrepreneurs	Poor families receiving baseline guarantee	Service men	Non-native workers	Total
47	9	7	3	3	3	3	2	8	85

The Table does not include 12 migrants who attended only the deliberative meeting on 19 March 2006

Table 2 Basic information on the selected participants

Category	Sub-category	Percent
Gender	Male	68.9
	Female	31.1
Marriage	Married	85.2
	Unmarried	14.8
Cultural and educational background	Illiterates	6.6
	Primary	37.7
	Lower secondary	39.3
	Higher secondary	11.5
	Professional	4.9
Occupation	Peasant	74.1
	Worker	5.6
	Business owner	7.4
	Merchant	9.3
	Other	3.7

undergo training; (4) have a capacity to control all of the proceedings throughout the deliberation process; and (5) ensure that all discussions are recorded and other data are maintained. These and other requirements are fundamental to deliberation, enabling the discussions to proceed in an orderly fashion and guaranteeing the overall quality of the deliberation.

Because equality is a core problem in Bianyu village and effectively absent in previous roundtable talks, we instituted further mechanisms. Before convening the talks, any relevant data or background material had to be prepared and distributed to all participants, ensuring that as many as possible had access to or at least time enough to grasp the subject matter before commencing discussion. We ensured also that each of the speakers were allocated equal times to speak. Furthermore, because village cadres held considerable sway, we did not allow them to attend the panel discussions. They were, however, required to attend the plenary and summing-up sessions.

Each of the roundtable talks primarily centred on one pre-determined major issue for 2 hours. The first hour was set aside for panel discussions. Participants were grouped into six panels with 14 participants in each. The groups then came together for a 1-hour plenary session. This was an opportunity for the cadres to listen and respond to competing views of the villagers. Drawing lots, two or three people were selected from each group as spokespersons. This random process maintains the integrity of representativeness across the groups and keeps the potential for undue influence to a minimum. No names were used in either the panel or plenary discussions, and only what the participants said was filed on record.

In brief, we tried to ensure that the design of village deliberation fully embodied the basic requirements of deliberative democracy—publicity, deliberation, broad representativeness and equality—in a set of functional mechanisms that would enable the village roundtables to evolve systematically in the direction of modern deliberative democracy.

In regard to taking dates, times, and other factors into account for the deliberative trials, we scheduled four meetings in 2006: 17 March, on issues of rural reconstruction planning; 19 March, on migrant families, social order, environment and sanitation; 21 March, on garbage disposal, cleaning up public toilets and rivers; and 26 June, on the village economy and afforestation. Each of the meetings followed the same formula. The village Party Secretary first welcomed the guests, including experts and town leaders. Following this was an announcement of the roundtable agenda and the requirements. Participants were obliged to fill a preliminary questionnaire and were then grouped into the panel discussions before coming together again later in the plenary session. On completion of the session, participants were required to complete an exit questionnaire.

The number of people participating in the roundtables, however, varied each time. Only 60 people participated in the initial roundtable on 17 March, whereas on 19 March 77 people participated, 12 of which were new villagers, because the subject matter of migrant families was directly relevant to them. Nonetheless, the majority of the randomly selected participants attended each meeting. This was a very positive outcome, preserving the integrity of village deliberation in Bianyu. Only a handful of those selected from our random samples failed to attend. The scholars and experts who were present as observers helped to ensure a level of equanimity in the deliberative process. Problems emerging in the course of the roundtable were resolved immediately. We had, for instance, an incident in the first roundtable with uninvited village cadres attending the panel discussions. We requested they leave, explaining to them that their presence could inhibit the panel discussions.

In all, the roundtable talks were carried out smoothly according to the procedures that we had established beforehand. Particularly promising was the participation of new villagers: they greatly appreciated the opportunity to attend. Not only was it the first time they had been represented in the Bianyu roundtables, it was also the first time they had been accorded respect by the native village inhabitants.

The Outcome of the Deliberative Democracy Experiment

The significance and value of democratic roundtables is evident in the content and performance of the participants' addresses in the plenary, the statistical results of the questionnaire survey, and in the impact they had on village decision-making. For a long time, rural China has lacked the institutional mechanisms for various groups to express fully their views on major village affairs. In most circumstances the manner in which affairs have been dealt with at village level has depended on an elite minority. In the democratic roundtable talks that we facilitated in Bianyu Village, representatives from different groups could speak freely and play a genuine role in significant village affairs.

Our foremost concern was to encourage a high level of authenticity in these talks. The participants in our trials discussed real issues in the setting of village life and engaged debates on village policies that affected households and individuals on a daily or a personal basis. As none of the policies introduced in the talks were predetermined, participants changed their policy preferences and affected the policy outcomes as a result of acquiring further information through the public deliberation proceedings. This was in marked contrast to the previous forums or political study meetings that we

were aware of in which people would simply nod in agreement with or validate by other such ineffectual means whatever the official line was.

As participants were able to express their views at the panel meetings, which were reiterated by speakers in the plenary addresses concluding the discussions, this had a direct effect on the attitudes and decisions of village leadership in regard to the significance of issues raised and their treatment of the villagers more generally. In the time since the deliberative experiments the opinions arising from those discussions appeared to be influencing how the village leaders deal with major affairs.

Village deliberation encouraged people from diverse social and economic backgrounds to contribute opinions. The discussions and exchanges that took place in Bianyu were relatively comprehensive. Yet participants openly expressed different points of view and contributed vital information that otherwise may not have seen the light of day. Often issues were raised that were slightly off-topic, but nonetheless relevant. Everyone was entitled to their opinion even if it conflicted with the majority.

In making a careful and thorough analysis of the recordings and questionnaires of what the participants said in and about the roundtable talks, we concluded that most, if not all, participants were earnest and forthright, each with their own analytical and expressive capabilities. Participants often cited reasons to support their views, not simply saying anything that came to mind. We see this, for instance, in the following exchange on the issue of the construction and management of “households for migrants”:

Moderator: Today we are launching a discussion on the proposal of building a new apartment for the non-native population. How can the housing situation be improved? What do you think of new people settling their families in the village?

#55: I don't think it would be good. After the new apartment is set up, there'll be too many migrants. It will be overwhelming. Too much disturbance! And hygienic conditions will only get worse.

#54: It should be said that living close together helps public security.

#53: Living close together makes it easier to deal with [social concerns].

#52: Some of the new non-natives of the population have a good awareness of hygiene. Some may be a little casual about garbage disposal, but the majority is not. Only a few are unhygienic.

#50: If they settle their households here the proper infrastructure ought to be built. The management [of the newly established apartment] needs to be strengthened as there are currently too many cases of theft; and higher authorities need to pay special attention to public security issues. There are people who stay at home all day, but then go out at night and break the law. Security staff members need to be employed to administer specifically to the non-natives [the migrant family households].

This is the basic manner in which the panel discussions took place. The moderator posed a general issue, which drew the participants to discuss the matters surrounding it.

In the discussion above there are three different points of view. One did not support migrant families settling in the village on the grounds that more would follow, and that it was jeopardising public security and health. Another view supported migrant families settling on the grounds that centralized housing was conducive to governing them. According to this view, closer living arrangements in turn increased public security and is a strong incentive for improving hygiene standards in regards to garbage disposal. The third point of view held that if migrant families continued to settle in great numbers, administration would have to keep up with it. It was argued that without recourse to sufficient management, no further settlement should be allowed because large concentrations of migrants would make it easier for thieves to practice criminal activity in the village.

What can we make of these divergent views? Obviously some of the reasons put forward by the participants to justify their arguments were inadequate. Nevertheless, so long as there is some kind of awareness of the issues been raised among the participants, there is greater capacity for informed debate and deeper reflection at the village level. In the above example, all of the participants attempted to convince others by supporting their points of view with evidence or argument. In this respect deliberative democracy's ideal of participation and public deliberation have at least been met on a subjective level, and this is representative of the divergent feelings, thoughts, and opinions of the larger population.

Part of the agenda for trialling deliberation in Bainyu was to assess the quality of village deliberation. To this end, we tested what effect the moderators had on the outcomes of the talks by setting up control and non-control groups. Moderators in the control group followed standard deliberative practices. They guided the discussions by encouraging the participants to take their time and think through their thoughts before speaking their mind. By contrast, moderators in the non-control group were not allowed to guide the discussions other than to ensure that all participants had at least the opportunity to speak. Participants from both groups were issued with public opinion surveys to complete before and after the deliberations so that comparative analysis of the two groups could be made. In doing so, we attempted to identify if the impact of village deliberation—as carried out under the standard practice of moderation—had any change in the participants' policy preference.

In Table 3 we present the results from the control and non-control group experiment. The experiment confirmed the view that given guidance and assistance, the level of reasoning among participants was clearly enhanced. Overall, the control group's composite index was 3.1 points higher than that of the non-control group. It is of course worth pointing out that the control group had a lower response index than the non-control group because the moderators guided the discussion. The results demonstrate that while the instruction and training of moderators was an effective mechanism for improving the deliberative capacities of those in Bainyu village, it also has wider application to the undertakings of deliberative democracy in all of rural China.

Another key feature of the roundtables was that participants, despite holding different or contrary views, often did not consider issues solely in terms of their own interests. Most were concerned for the overall situation of the village, and in many cases expressed an awareness of the situations confronting migrants and other disadvantaged groups. For instance, even though many of the participants had acquired extra income from migrant house rentals, they still did not support the settlement of migrant

Table 3 Speech and discussion level of control and non-control groups

Groups		Opinion index		Reasoning index		Response index		Composite index
Control group	Group 1	6.46	4.945	1.64	1.82	0.09	0.45	6.37
	Group 2	6.57		1.43		1.0		9.0
	Group 3	3.63		2.38		0.25		6.25
Non-control group	Group 4	3.63	2.418	1.38	1.02	1.5	0.66	6.5
	Group 5	1.78		0.67		0.11		2.56
	Group 6	1.85		1.0		0.38		3.23

Two research assistants, Xu Qunfens, and Zhao Y. Vista, listened to the recorded tapes and written notes, and identified and coded the number of expressed opinions, the reasons put forth, and responses made to others—one score for each. These scores are added up and divided by the number of the participants of each group. The final score exhibits the distinctive features of deliberation—the plurality of opinions, the response rates to the debates, and general attentiveness

families. As the discussions progressed, however, they learned of the poor living conditions of the migrants renting homes. Many of the neighbouring villagers had expressed how this inevitably had an impact on their lives as well. These participants renting homes had cause to rethink their position on migrant families settling in view of both the migrants' and neighbouring villagers' living conditions. Meanwhile, many participants proposed educating landlords on improving the physical conditions of their rental properties, providing more services, and last, but not least, improving interpersonal relationships with migrant renters. During the panel discussions, many rejected the proposal of building a new apartment for migrant workers; after the plenary discussions as many as 88 % of the participants supported the proposal.

Of the issues raised concerning public health, the majority of participants supported the building of public toilets in parks and in the areas where many migrants lived. On the issue of garbage disposal, most participants thought that the incentive of simply bagging up the garbage would do little to contain the bad smell. There was majority support for the idea that each household dispose of bagged garbage in designated communal trashcans, which could then be collected by workers and hauled to the village's waste landfills.

The democratic roundtables also offered the representatives of the disadvantaged migrant population an opportunity to voice their concerns to villager participants, the majority of which were receptive. After hearing the migrants' concerns, for instance, on the issue of charging them for use of the public toilets, as many as 62.7 % of the villager participants did not support the charge. Some argued that because migrants contributed to developing the village in many other ways, such basic facilities ought to be freely available to the migrant families.

The other roundtables also achieved a relatively high degree of consensus among the participants. The subjects discussed in all four roundtables were all important issues encountered in Bianyu Village, some of which were contentious. Not all were in agreement, particularly on issues at the start, but by the end of the roundtables participants had changed their mind sufficiently to take active steps to resolve issues. Comparing the results of the surveys conducted prior to and at the conclusion of the roundtable talks, the participants achieved greater consensus following the talks (see

the statistical results presented in Tables 4 and 5). On the issue of garbage disposal, for instance, prior to the roundtable, 46 % of participants supported bagging up garbage and leaving it at the door, while only 54 % supported each household taking it to a communal garbage bin, which would be collected by workers and hauled into the village's waste landfills. The two opinions were basically evenly matched, but after the roundtable talks the corresponding proportions became 17.8 % and 82.2 %, placing the outcome in majority affirmative support for the second, sanitary option.

Again, the margin between opinions was relatively narrow on the issues raised concerning public health. Before the roundtable talks only 56.1 %—admittedly over one half of the number of participants—supported the building of public toilets in parks and in the areas where migrants lived. But after the roundtable, those in agreement reached 80.7 %. Before the Roundtable 50.9 % of participants thought the “new people” should be charged to use the toilets. Because representatives from the migrant population, however, had the opportunity to voice their concerns over this and argue their case to the village participants in the roundtables—as described earlier—62.7 % of people by the end of the discussion had rejected the proposal.

Villagers were naturally very concerned about the development of village land, and the use of village collective income in relation to this, which in the past had often been disputed. In regard to one lot of village land, before the roundtable talks half of the participants thought that it should be used to build private housing. The other half, however, supported the idea that village and the town government jointly owned land

Table 4 Outcomes of roundtable on environmental sanitation (21 March)

Topic	Choice	Percentage	
		Pre-roundtable survey	Post-roundtable survey
What is the best mode of garbage disposal?	Households bag and place at door for collective disposal	46	17
	Households dump separately	54	82.2
Should public toilets be built?	Yes	56.1	80.7
	No	43.9	19.3
Vote on the appointment of an administrator for public toilets	Yes	81	83.7
	No	19	16.3
What should be the monthly fee of a cleaner for public toilets?	400 Yuan	35.3	57.7
	500 Yuan	33.3	19.2
	600 Yuan	23.5	11.5
	700 Yuan	7.8	11.5
Should migrants be charged to use public toilets?	Yes	50.9	37.3
	No	49.1	62.7
Where should public toilets be built?	Areas of high migrant density; in public areas; at Xiaoliufen; at Council offices; in front of West boundary.	A bit further away from homes, at the riverside, Xiaoshan Park	

Table 5 Survey of roundtable talks (26 June)

Topic	Choice	Percentage	
		Pre-roundtable survey	Post-roundtable survey
In the joint investment in afforestation around houses by the village collective and villagers, how appropriate was the village collective investment?	20 %	27.5	6.5
	30 %	11.8	9.7
	50 %	19.6	13
	70 %	41.2	71
How should 5 mu of undeveloped village reserve land be developed?	Village self-funded	52.5	48.4
	Jointly with developers	16.9	40.3
	Don't know	30.5	11.3
If the village self-funded development goes ahead, would you invest?	Willing	87.8	74.2
	Unwilling	12.2	9.7
	Other	0	16.1
If village funds are inadequate, would it be best to apply for a bank loan or to issue stock to villagers?	Bank loan best	13.8	35.5
	Villager stock	62.1	59.7
	Don't know	24.1	4.8
How best to develop a 4 mu block of land for private housing construction?	Build houses according to grade	50	17.7
	change status of land to state-owned, open to public tender	50	74.7
	Other	0	8.1

and then opening it to the public to tender bids. After the roundtable talks, those holding the former view had dropped to a mere 17.7 %, while the latter view had risen to 74.7 %, ending what had been a serious split in opinion.

Of course, consensus could not be reached on certain issues. On the issue of how 5 mu of village reserve land should be developed, for instance, neither side could garner more than 50 % support, with 48.4 % preferring that the village provide the development funds itself, while 40.3 % preferred joint development. This is quite normal—it is impossible to achieve consensus on all questions. When opinions do differ, democratic roundtable talks may at least provide a platform that reduces the severity of differences or achieves some level of understanding, which itself is beneficial to the harmony of the village. It should be mentioned, however, that village leaders have implemented the decisions that achieved consensus in the 2006 deliberations.

The Limits of Deliberative Democracy Experimentation

As explained earlier, we undertook the experiment of democratic roundtable talks in Bianyu according to the principles of equality, openness, and broad representation. In

doing so, we added the mechanisms of random sampling, of disseminating information prior to the participants, and of moderation during group discussions. We stipulated that village leaders abstain from the discussions, but attend the plenary session in which they could respond to the addresses made by the participants. We also introduced the mechanism of making on-the-spot announcements of outcomes to shield against or at least minimize manipulation. Prior to and at the end of proceedings we arranged for the participants to complete confidential questionnaires to enable comparison of the results of the issues that were deliberated.

Despite efforts to make the talks an even playing field, existing unequal social structures persisted. The social structural patterns we encountered in Bianyu manifested during the meetings in four defining ways: inequality between the locally registered population and the new village population, a discrepancy between the village cadres and villagers; status disparity between different occupational groups, and status difference between the various clans.

The unequal social strata of the participants impacted the deliberations in a number of ways. First, participants varied greatly in their ability to argue or advocate their point of view. Village cadres in particular were well-accustomed to the roundtable environment; they often travelled extensively outside the village accruing experience by attending conferences, and had a comparatively higher awareness of policies at both village and state level. Clearly, in the plenary sessions they were better at expressing themselves than the non-cadre participants making the address. If allowed to attend the panel sessions they would have commanded talks, seeing it as part of their responsibility as cadre members to do so. By contrast, some villagers had trouble expressing their arguments. Participants who had worked on farms for most of their lives and not seen much the world struggled the most. Their expression and capacity for analysis of the issues raised was often poor. Many of the migrant participants also struggled in having never participated in an activity such as this. Given their new status in the village, they had no previous need to express views on the matters concerning the villagers, let alone engage the issues in the first instance. The following dialogue reflects something of this:

Moderator: Your feelings should be deep: tell us about your immediate experience as a migrant.

No. 8: Can't say.

Moderator: Where do you think it's best to live?

No. 8: Living in a landlord's house is fine, the houses are fine, and rental conditions are as well.

Moderator: For you, living as a migrant family is OK?

No. 8: Mmm.

No. 28: Can't say. No point saying....I can pay the money. If I had to pay another ten Yuan I could.

It is easy to tell from these exchanges that Nos. 8 and. 28 are migrants. The performance of “new people” in roundtable talks is of course affected by their status in village society, hence they either think themselves incapable of speaking up, or that it is pointless to do so—that it makes no difference. A significant problem for us was that the village leaders insisted that the migrants not take part in the deliberation questionnaire. Village leaders were concerned that completing the questionnaire as part of the roundtables would entitle the migrants with the same level of authority, depriving native villagers their advantaged status both in this and future circumstances.

A second factor affecting the roundtable talks was that people of different status had considerably varied opportunities to obtain or process information. This again affected their understanding of the issue at hand and the role they played in village deliberation. In this respect, some participants either stood firm on issues with entrenched views or by contrast simply followed the crowd, believing what others thought. At other times some participants failed to understand or adhere to the established procedures. This meant that some were ill-informed or simply failed to comprehend the policy being discussed. Such was the case in this scenario:

Moderator: Are you familiar with private plots in this village?

No. 46: I don’t know: I am not even sure where they are.

A third factor was the social conditions of the roundtables themselves. The socially and economically advantaged social strata participants often exhibited a high level of confidence or forcefulness, which had a direct impact on the disadvantaged participants, who by contrast often made self-deprecating comments and gestures or held back from the discussion with a sense of feebleness. This is evident in the following remarks:

Villager No.19: The villagers say not to do something, the villager leader says to do it, it doesn’t matter what we say, the village leader has fixed everything in advance. It’s pointless for us to say anything. The words of common people have no weight.

No. 20: I don’t know, cadres are appointed to take responsibility.

No. 42: No point saying anything.

Aside from the impediments of the sorts of sustained social inequality described, a final factor that continues to impact both the quality and institution of deliberation in Bianyu has been the time allocated to the proceedings and the frequency with which deliberations are held. Since our time there in 2006 only a few deliberations have been conducted annually, and even then they are only for an hour or two at a time. This needs dramatic improvement if deliberations are to have a future there.

Despite these considerable shortcomings with deliberation in regards to the problem of social inequality, we can be reassured that deliberation in Bianyu does nonetheless give villagers across social strata a definitive right to speak on village affairs with a relatively equal opportunity for expression.

Clearly, the above factors constitute serious challenges to democratic roundtables and deliberative democracy in general. Keeping social inequality to a minimum in roundtables is by all means a democratic imperative. This applies not only to roundtables held in China but also to other countries as well. A study of village meetings in South India, for instance, also found incidences of social inequality that could adversely impact deliberative outcomes. According to the findings, the more land a person owns there, the higher the likelihood their preferences will be mentioned in the village meetings. It follows that the longer the amount of time spent discussing this person's preferences, the higher the likelihood that a decision will be made for restoration of the public or private good at issue [16].

While helping to improve Bianyu Village's democratic roundtable talks, we tried in earnest to reduce the effects of social inequality, and some aspects of it simply could not be curbed by our design. For instance, the discrepancy in the social strata of participants with different capacities for expression could not be eliminated through one or two meetings: it evidenced a social mindset that had long been entrenched as part the everyday social life of the villagers. We would only be able to gradually resolve this through a series of unremitting democratic roundtable talks. If such meetings were held continually, the kind of dialogue and policy-making mechanisms which deliberative democracy engenders might spill over into the daily reality of villager life, little by little deconstructing existing social inequalities and promoting the development of democracy in rural China.

Conclusion

To a certain degree democratic roundtable talks in Bianyu Village contained some practices, ideas and principles of deliberative democracy, such as mutual respect, participation, public deliberation, equality of opportunity, and empowerment in terms of the impact on policy making. To advance the development of China's deliberative democracy, several mechanisms and institutions suited to China based on the practice of Bianyu Village need to be in place. They include hiring moderators from outside the village, random selections of participants, distribution of information in advance, decision-making processes based on discussions and questionnaires, isolating leading cadres from panel discussions, and monitoring systems such as observation by scholars and other experts. Establishing these institutions may of course seem rather complex, but they can effectively curb undue influence arising from social inequality, give each person relatively equal opportunities and rights to deliberate, and enhance the legitimacy of policy-making. Indeed, this is the key lesson drawn from our experimental studies.

The Bianyu case demonstrates that as soon as a village economy reaches a certain level, which gives rise to a set of social issues and conflicts, the idea of deliberative democracy is urgently needed. Indeed, on being exposed to the benefits of village deliberation, some of the wiser village leaders are increasingly employing new mechanisms to reduce social conflict. More recently, we have seen developments taken to a new level with input by the state. In 2010 the Legislative Office of the State Council drafted the document: "Guidelines on Procedures and Rules for Public Hearings". In 2012, Chongqing introduced a set of new open decision-making processes for villages. It

is reasonably optimistic to expect that an increasing number of villages will introduce and improve village deliberation mechanisms and institutions in the near future in rural China.

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