

Chinese Democracy in the Process of State Modernization: The Operational Logic and Institutional Advantages of Consultative Democracy

Zeyu Niu^{1,a,*}

¹*Government and International Studies Department, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong, China*

a. 21200521@life.hkbu.edu.hk

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Since the reform and opening up in 1978, China's modernization has been on the proper track, and the path of China's modernization is distinct from that of the Western capitalist countries. The traditional Western modernization theory does not provide a reasonable explanation for China's evolution, and Huntington's 1968 proposal of modernization under a strong government became the basis of China's growth philosophy. Based on the different theoretical frameworks of modernization favored by China and the West, the modernization manifestations, political systems, and forms of democracy in China and the West are subsequently different. In this paper, we examine the advantages of China's consultative democracy and even full process democracy by comparing the modernization performance between China and developed Western countries. The comparison reveals that China's consultative democracy provides a platform for citizens to express their policy proposals and for different social groups to discuss the solution strategies for social problems on an equal footing, which effectively protects the interests of citizens and can solve problems more directly and effectively. This paper will explore how national governments can achieve effective democracy through a cross-sectional comparison, and provide a realistic reference for the modernization process of developing countries, to help them better establish modernization strategies and achieve far-reaching modernization.

Keywords: China modernization, consultative democracy, state, modernization theory, whole-process people's democracy

1. Introduction

Modernization is one of the keywords of state development. Modernization refers to a multidimensional, multifaceted transformation to modern society, a necessary evolutionary process from the back to the developed [1]. Although China's modernization has gained a significant span of progress in the short term, it is still in the under-developed stage. And China has not reached the transition from conventional to the modern industry so far. The existing revolution in industry, science, and technology in China has provided some impetus and backup for political, economic, social, cultural, and intellectual development, but the degree of modernization is uneven and the

impetus is insufficient to achieve a high degree of modernization in the short term. China's modernization path can be roughly divided into three stages: the first stage is before the founding of the country, 1840 as the beginning of China's modernization exploration, China's future development is more unknown, in favor of Western capitalist development; the second stage is from 1921 to 1978, China confirmed the development path of socialism, modeled on the Soviet-style socialism. China's socialist path followed the Soviet Union with state ownership instead of private ownership. The Soviet-style development proved to be unsuitable for China's national conditions and directly limited the dynamism of the economy; the third stage emerged after the reform and opening up, when China established the development direction of socialism with Chinese characteristics, focusing on China's basic national conditions and realizing its original potential [2].

The third modernization theory proposed by Huntington is the modernization path under the leadership of a strong political party. It would be the most appropriate theory for the evolution of Chinese modernization. This theory emphasizes the effectiveness, legitimacy, and organization of government policy over and above the difference between democracy and dictatorship. Huntington draws a simple analogy between the governments of the United Kingdom, the United States, and the Soviet Union during the same period [3]. This research demonstrated that all three governments were effective and legitimate, even though they had different models of government and the citizens were highly accepting of the political systems. China is a socialist country in which multi-party cooperation and political consultation under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party is the main form of democratic politics in China. Therefore, China's democracy is different from that of Western capitalist countries and socialist one-party countries and has a very special form of democracy, which is significantly different from other countries [4]. Moreover, China's form of democracy is still in the process of long-term reform and is directly influenced by the basic national conditions and the degree of modernization and development.

This paper will investigate the operation logic of China's consultative democracy and the institutional superiority of China's unique democratic politics over the West's, mainly through a process-tracing approach and a comparative approach, respectively. First, the relationship between democracy and modernization in the development path of Western modernization theory democracy will be discussed through a process tracing approach, and the causal relationship will be explored. Second, the paper will analyze in depth how consultative democracy operates in Chinese society during the Chinese modernization process, its operational mechanisms, and its actual performance. Next, the paper will compare Chinese and Western forms of democracy horizontally, to explore the differences, advantages, and disadvantages of the two forms of democratic expression.

While China has developed rapidly in recent years and has even become an international trendsetter in some domains, its political system and form of democracy are still widely discussed by scholars. The purpose of this paper is to analyze in depth the unique Chinese consultative democracy and the widely accepted Western democracy through an intuitive horizontal comparison, reflecting the specific differences and advantages and disadvantages, and seeking a Chinese definition of democracy. Based on Huntington's modernization theory, this paper intensifies the practical application of the theory to China's development and, to a certain extent, enriches the existing scholars' understanding of Chinese democracy with additional explanations of the actual performance and future development of Chinese consultative democracy.

2. Western Modernization Theory and Democracy

The development process of transformation of Western countries to modernization from the 16th to the 18th century was dominated by England, the Netherlands, France, and Germany. The development of modernization in the West was almost irreducible and unpredictable. At the beginning of the 16th century and even before, the process of development of European countries

was not outstanding, and as the industrial revolution occurred, the West occupied a dominant position in the international community. In the 16th and 17th centuries, however, the European countries were absorbing the excellent culture of other countries during the Renaissance and the ideological enlightenment, which provided a good ideological environment for the subsequent development of modernization. According to the German sociologist Max Weber, religious change also influenced the social environment of the time, and Protestantism was a “this-worldly” religion. The religious transformation led people to focus on their own achievements and professional development, which contributed to the creation and development of modern capitalism [5].

The political and economic innovations that emerged in the 18th century were the direct cause of the emergence of modern Western society. The invention of the steam engine heralded the booming of British industry. The invention of the steam engine heralded the booming of British industry. The early establishment of a constitutional monarchy and the completion of domestic agricultural reforms before the Industrial Revolution, coupled with the strong potential of the British native bourgeoisie, pushed Britain to its economic peak. All of the above contributed to making Britain the most powerful country at that time and the first to enter modern society. Between the 19th and 18th centuries, Western countries expanded Asian markets through colonial expansion and also accelerated the collapse of traditional Asian societies due to Western political, economic, and cultural agreements that challenged the original feudal societies of Asia, especially China [6].

After the American and French political revolutions, the constitutional government of modern Western society and the political characteristics of democracy and the rule of law were truly established thereafter. The root cause of the American and French political revolutions was the inequality of social status and wealth between the aristocracy and the religiously privileged, the ethnically privileged, and the common people. As ideas became more enlightened, the influence of liberal political organizations and other concepts led the people to take to the streets to protest against this injustice. With the violent revolution, the monarchy, the hegemony, and the privileges of the nobility were removed and a constitution centered on “people’s power” was established. Most of the Western capitalist countries adopted the administrative separation of powers to check and balance the national government, to prevent the government from becoming too powerful again, similar to a “monarchy”. Therefore, when the Constitution was first written, its original purpose was to distribute power and decentralize the functions of the government. The system of separation of powers was used to maintain a system in which “civil liberties and equal rights” were the main political core. The separation of powers in the Western political system emphasizes the cooperative and independent nature of the legislature, judiciary, and politics, especially the judicial court. Judicial independence is an important foundation that directly constrains the national government, and it will be determined right or wrong by the court according to the Constitution. and other fundamental laws [7]. In general, the modernization of Western countries began with ideological and cultural changes, followed by economic development and political system reform.

Therefore, due to the historical process of the Western capitalist countries and the original purpose of modernization and reform to decentralize power to avoid dictatorship and the importance of civil rights, democracy has become the key to the Western political system. Democracy means that the people will have supreme power and will exercise political power directly or indirectly through representation, and the public will participate directly in the affairs of government. The main manifestations of democracy in the West are regular free elections and voting, universal suffrage, competition for public office, freedom of speech, and the rule of law. Democracy has become the hallmark political outcome of modernization, while the economic outcome of modernization is marketization, urbanization, and cultural pluralism.

3. Consultative Democracy in the Process of Chinese-style Modernization

The developmental history of Chinese-style modernization is not the same as that of Western modernization. The sequence of development of Chinese modernization is also different, and the overall development process has undergone complex exploration and changes. Consultative democracy is a democratic system that has been formally established in China since the establishment of the socialist political system with Chinese characteristics, which is in line with China's national conditions. China divides democracy into three main segments, namely, electoral democracy, consultative democracy, and autonomous democracy [8]. Electoral democracy means that direct elections are used to determine the people's representatives. Consultative democracy is expressed in the form of national people's congresses and political consultative conferences, where delegates propose policy improvements based on their views, and autonomous democracy is expressed in the form of regional autonomy, such as the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region and the Tibetan Autonomous Region in Tibet; it also includes provincial governments and municipal governments within provinces. The development goal of Chinese-style modernization, according to the latest National People's Congress, is to deepen people's democracy based on the existing consultative democracy and to truly meet the actual needs of citizens.

Consultative democracy is the "socialist consultative democracy system" proposed by the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China. The consultative democracy system is conducive to integrating social views and bringing social issues to light to truly resolve existing social conflicts, find the greatest focus of interests, and seek to maximize the interests of all social groups. Different social groups can submit proposals through the National People's Congress and the Political Consultative Assembly. All delegates will vote by name to identify the public's current needs on social issues and consider possible solutions.

China's unique situation requires a concept of governance and democracy that is different from that of other countries. In order to achieve long-term modernization, China needs to redistribute the functions and combinations of market, government and society, and to institutionalize the roles of market, government and society and the conditions they need to meet. The government element includes the central government, local governments, and related public institutions governed by the state, whose main functions are macro-regulation of the direction of national development, policy governance, improvement of resource allocation, infrastructure construction, etc. The main manifestation of the market element is privatized, market-oriented economic and trade transactions, while the free market demand supply is adjusted autonomously. Society, as the third party of the national governance element, contains chambers of commerce, NGOs, and trade organizations, whose main functions are more oriented to problem statement, expressing their own needs, and restraining the unreasonable behavior of the government and the market. There is a tension between these three, and this tension is the system of consultative democracy. The consultative democracy system strengthens the cooperation of the three elements of governance and achieves mutual restraint, thus forming a "tripod" governance structure. The government-market-society structure is more capable of meeting China's governance needs than the Western tri-partite governance structure. It needs to be realistic, nationally applicable, and micro-adapted to the changing social conditions of the country.

China's modernization is undoubtedly a long-term development process, based on socialism with Chinese characteristics, with consultative democracy as the central political system constantly undergoing multidimensional and diversified political, economic, and cultural development. China's basic national conditions are also extremely complex, with unequal and uneven economic development, a consultative democracy system that still needs to be continuously optimized, and social issues such as the distribution of educational resources remain huge challenges [9]. China's

modernization cannot exist apart from socialism with Chinese characteristics, and China's development path is an exploration of modernization from a socialist perspective, a practice with creativity [10]. As a special manifestation of socialism with Chinese characteristics, consultative democracy has been optimized to become a full process of people's democracy.

4. The Comparative Advantage of China's Consultative Democracy: The Difference with Western Democracy

The main advantages of Chinese consultative democracy over Western democracy are the degree of political participation, eclectic direct elections, and the democratic resolution of proposals.

First, Chinese consultative democracy truly provides a platform for citizens to communicate directly and jointly with government institutions. A country has a reasonably fair and effective grievance platform where citizens can express their views on the problems they face and how they would like to see that problem answered. The government can also use this channel to explain the reasons for the issuance of certain bills and policies, and the consideration of the actual situation, and can request the participation of professional scholars in the discussion. The value of such a platform would be to explore the most direct and optimal policy, with citizens and the national government working together as partners to analyze more objectively, discuss solutions, and vote on the final solution. There are problems when a country does not have such a channel of complaint and can only go through legal channels and solve individual problems. While the Western capitalist countries have been solving such problems mainly since the judicial system, there are drawbacks to relying entirely on the judicial system in combination with the actual situation. First, it is the cost of time and money spent by the plaintiff. Second, most social problems do not only occur in individuals but are widespread problems for a certain social group, a certain industry, or even a regional or national government. The legal system is better suited to solve problems of individual interests and damaged rights, but for more macro and broad social problems, the law is not applicable to solve such problems. This is why citizens are forced to use social movements, and demonstrations, to voice their dissatisfaction with a single event or bill, or even with a particular industry or institution, to force the government or institution to take action to solve the problem. The existence of such institutions and platforms will make the relationship between the state and citizens less hostile or managerial and more of a service-and-service relationship, a more peaceful and effective way to communicate and reflect on social issues. Compared with direct voting in Western capitalist countries, consultative democracy, and even full-scale popular democracy allow citizens to participate in the formulation of government policies, which can effectively reduce the number of violent rebellions caused by the unmet needs of social groups.

Second, consultative democracy combines the advantages of the Western proposal for universal suffrage. The premise of consultative democracy is the direct election of people's representatives, who are recommended to vote at different levels, from regional people's representatives to municipal people's representatives and even provincial people's representatives, and participate in national decision-making discussions. Direct elections are one of the extremely important manifestations of democracy and an effective means of ensuring equal political power for citizens. This is because direct universal suffrage ensures that citizens' votes carry equal weight as well as demonstrates the exercise of political power by citizens. Likewise, China's consultative democracy includes the advantage of grievance proposals, expanding the practicality of people's democracy and making citizens' political power not just in the choice of the person who will manage them, but the decider in the decision-making process. Consultative democracy both ensures the fairness and autonomy of universal suffrage and increases the degree to which citizens participate in politics and engage in changing real social problems.

Third, China's consultative democracy is effective and efficient. As mentioned above, the main form of democracy in the West is direct elections, counting referenda to decide on the president, or to decide on the implementation of bills, etc. The Western form of democracy has options, and in presidential elections, the percentage of the popular vote determines the exact winner of the presidency. The presidential election is like a multiple-choice question on a test, where citizens decide for themselves which candidate is the best, and the establishment of a bill can be likened to a judgment question on a test, where it is known that Bill A is proposed by the relevant political body and the citizens decide whether to formally implement it. Specifically, citizens themselves do not have the platform as well as the opportunity to present their demands or proposals. The government is often informed of the actual needs of citizens through violent movements by citizens, and the emergence of a violent movement often means that the need has gone unattended for a long time or that a social problem has gone unsolved for a long time. The process of uncovering social problems through citizen protests to government policies to solve them is cumbersome and inefficient. Social problems are often identified only after the negative impact of the problem has increased and become widely visible through human rights campaigns, and there is no institutional social institution responsible for summarizing the actual needs of citizens. For example, in the case of the massive human rights movement that resulted from the death of George Floyd in 2020, the essence of the event was the violent enforcement of the law by the police and the people's expression of their discontent with the attitude of the police and the double standards against different races. Objectively speaking, the loss of both economic development and public infrastructure during the mass protests became a hidden cost for the people to state their social problems. In addition, the process of citizen protest reinforces the conflict between the government and the citizens and does not contribute to the solution of the problem. One of the advantages of consultative democracy is that it fundamentally reduces the time costs, public interest, and potential risks to the government-citizen relationship caused by citizens protesting their problems. In addition, modernization does not only mean Urbanization and economic development, however, social stability, high quality of life, and subjective well-being are also evaluation criteria of modernization. However, the lack of institutional channels for citizens' complaints and platforms for expressing social problems in the Western polity has led to a high level of social instability and represents the incomplete modernization of Western societies.

The Chinese system of consultative democracy is functional in that it summarizes the needs of citizens. Citizens can participate in meetings and discussions to state their demands and discuss solutions in a non-violent movement. The two ports of problem identification and solution reduce the loss of public interest caused by violent campaigns and the time cost of problem-solving. Citizens can make their demands known through the National People's Congress and provide suggestions to the national government to solve problems. Citizens' political participation is not just about seeking optimal solutions among limited options but can articulate more specific problems. China's consultative democracy and even full process people's democracy have become institutionalized platforms for citizens to voice their demands and suggestions, reducing the loss of relevant public rights and interests as well as potential costs, but there is still room for development and improvement.

5. Conclusions

The modern evolution of Western countries has its unique progression and sequence of reforms, and its political system has adopted the separation of powers as the basis since the beginning of its establishment, distributing and constraining power to decentralize the functionality of the government. In contrast, China has adopted a multi-party cooperation system led by the Communist Party of China, with a more functional Chinese government and the National People's Congress as

the main expression of consultative democracy. The central government devolves power hierarchically to local governments, autonomous regions, etc., and governs at each level. The central government provides macro-level governance by setting macro-level development goals. It is the differences between the Chinese and Western systems that lead to different manifestations of democracy, each with its advantages and disadvantages. One is that consultative democracy truly allows citizens to participate directly in the policy-making process, allowing their immediate interests to be expressed and addressed; the other is that consultative democracy combines the advantages of Western universal suffrage, which guarantees equal civil and political rights through direct elections, and on top of that expands citizens' political choices by allowing them to directly address the government. The second is that consultative democracy combines the advantages of Western universal suffrage, which guarantees equal political rights through direct elections, and on top of that expands citizens' political choice to appeal and propose directly to the government.

In general, it is the difference in the original intent of the creation of social institutions in Chinese and Western societies, especially about the functionality of government, that has directly influenced the direction of modernization and the different theoretical frameworks in China and the West. The exploration of consultative democracy in China's modernization process has more practical and effective advantages than the direct election democracy in the West.

References

- [1] Soo, F. (1989). *China and Modernization: Past and Present a Discussion*. *Studies in Soviet Thought*, 38(1), 3–54.
- [2] ZHAO, Q. (2022). *Research Status and Deepening Development of Chinese Style Modernization Road*. *Journal of Xi'an University of Finance and Economics*, 35(06), 5–17.
- [3] Huntington, S. P. (1996). *Political Order in Changing Societies*. In JSTOR. Yale University Press.
- [4] Angang Hu. (2014). *The Modernization of China's State Governance*. Institute For Contemporary China Studies, Tsinghua University.
- [5] Encyclopaedia Britannica. (2004, April 29). *Modernization - The West and the world*. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/modernization/The-West-and-the-world>
- [6] Borsa, G. (2000). *The Modernization of Asia and the Western Impact*. *Il Politico*, 65(1 (192)), 151–155.
- [7] Zoldan, E. C. (2021, August 13). *The Vanishing Core of Judicial Independence*. Retrieved from https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3702616
- [8] Shang, zhixiao. (2020, May 26). *The Institutional Advantages of the People as Masters*. Retrieved from <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1667721300577762027&wfr=spider&for=pc>
- [9] Zheng, J. (2023). *The Present Situation and Prospect of Research on Chinese Modernization*. *Probe*, 02, 14–27.
- [10] Zhang, W. (2012). *China touches the world* (pp. 147–154). Shanghai People's Publishing House.
- [11] Eckersley, R. M. (2016). *Is the West really the best? Modernization and the psychosocial dynamics of human progress and development*. *Oxford Development Studies*, 44(3), 349–365.