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Rebekka Åsnes Sagild | Anna L. Ahlers

WORKING FOR HARMONY AND INNOVATION?

POLITICAL INCLUSION OF DIVERSIFIED ELITES VIA THE CHINESE PEOPLE'S POLITICAL CONSULTATIVE CONFERENCE



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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the fascinating case of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference system (CPPCC) and its evolution since 1949. The CPPCC's original idea is to allow select members who represent the diversity of society in the one-party state gain limited access to policy-making in exchange for their (public show of) adherence to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Usually seen as merely a decorative "flower vase" for the one-party regime, or – at best – as a networking club meant to appease varying elite groups in Chinese society, the CPPCCs represent a largely overlooked part in research on the Chinese political system. Despite the CCP's fundamental ideological transformations since 1949 it adamantly clings to this symbol of "party-external consultation" and the "Patriotic United Front", which was recently reinvigorated by the party leadership. Against this background, in this article we trace the major developments in the CPPCC since 1949 and identify both the continuities as well as significant interpretational and practical shifts that have occurred with regard to the CPPCC's main official functions: "representation" and "consultation". We have looked, in particular, at official descriptions and legitimations of the CPPCC system, delegates' self-conceptualization and interpretation of their role, and how all this translates into the conferences' political practice today. Our preliminary findings show how the CPPCC on the one hand still embodies the CCP's traditional preference for differential political inclusion, which in this case equates social status with political capability and bets on the cooptation of diversified elites. On the other hand, we observe that the deliberately non-transparent and flexible selection criteria and work guidelines for the CPPCC present both constraints as well as chances for selected members when defining their role and function. Finally, beyond providing an overview of the CPPCC system's evolution, status, and work mode, we identify the many gaps that still exist in research on this institution and suggest potential starting points for future studies.

1. INTRODUCTION

While neither a body of state power, nor a policy-making organ, the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conferences (CPPCCs) hold a special position in the Chinese political system as a party-external 'consultative forum'. These conferences exist across the whole Chinese political hierarchy. [1] The Chinese Communist party (CCP) itself claims that the CPPCCs are "broadly representative organizations of the United Front". [2] This implies, in particular, that the CPPCC is made up of people from the eight other officially acknowledged political parties, minorities, religious leaders, and different segments of the general Chinese population, including Chinese overseas, [3] in short "people from all walks of life". [4] Through consultation, the CPPCC is nominally supposed to be the main channel for formal interest representation for many of these groups. Estimations of the number of representatives ranges upwards of 650 000, not including the establishment of "friendship associations" set up in some major cities, which host up to several thousand former members of the CPPCC.

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Members to the conferences are tasked with proposing policies, conducting "democratic supervision" and participating in the deliberation of state affairs. In other words, officially, the CPPCC is supposed to enable the articulation of plural voices in the political process, in support of the other, all heavily CCP-dominated institutions. [5] At the same time, the consultative conferences are to "follow the leadership of the CCP" and their membership composition, especially the disproportional share of rich business people and high-status persons, seems to contradict the official claim of broad-based representation. Moreover, the consultative conferences are not formally part of the state system, but are the key body of the United Front Work Department (UFWD), an agency tasked with managing elite

[1] CPPCC here denotes the overall institution in the Chinese political system that we find at the national and provincial level, in autonomous regions, and municipalities (directly under the central government), cities at prefectural level, autonomous counties and cities at county-level, as well as in districts under the jurisdiction of cities. Where it makes a significant difference for our argument, we have pointed out whether we are referring to the central level PPCC or a particular subnational one. The relationship between the National CPPCC and local committees is first and foremost one of top-down 'guidance' (指导关系 *zhidao guanxi*). However local committees set their own working agendas and operate largely independent from their corresponding intermediate committees.

[2] This formulation is used in the Constitution of the People's Republic of China (1982).

[3] Overseas Chinese (华侨 *huqiao*) is a loosely defined concept referring to people of Chinese descent living (more or less) permanently outside the PRC. While members of the CPPCC are only allowed to hold Chinese citizenship (the PRC does not permit dual citizenship), several instances of members holding dual citizenship have been discovered in recent years. In fact, the topic of dual citizenship is frequently discussed in the CPPCC, including in 1999, 2005, 2016, and 2018; see "Zhengxie changwei: Jianyi yunxu haiwai huaren baoliu huifu zhongguo guoji" (CPPCC Standing Committee member: It is recommended to allow Overseas Chinese to keep and recover their Chinese nationality). Tencent News, <https://news.qq.com/a/20160315/010748.htm> (accessed 7 March 2019); "2018 Lianghui zhi «zhongguo ren de bailei», shuangchong guoji he «jianyu dongwuyuan»" (2018 Two Sessions of «Chinese scum», dual citizenship and «Prison Zoo»). BBC, <https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/chinese-news-43341816> (accessed 7 March 2019).

[4] 各界 *gejie* is the term most often used in this case and usually translated into "people from all walks of life" in official translations of CPPCC-documents.

[5] Most recently, in October 2018, the CCP's Central Committee re-emphasized that the CPPCC ought to adhere to Xi Jinping's core status (核心地位 *hexin diwei*), to act as a political organization (政治组织 *zhengzhi zuzhi*), and to take a clear stand when discussing policies, in other words: to not oppose central policies. See "Zhonggong zhongyang bangong ting yinfa «guanyu jia-qiāng xin shidai rénmin zhengxie dang de jiānshe gōngzuò de ruoguān yíjiàn" (The General Office of the Central Committee of the communist party of China issues "Several opinions on strengthening party-construction in the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference in the new era"), Xinhua, 14 October 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-10/14/c_1123556794.htm?mc_cid=cb8f1f683e&mc_eid=f25202d7c2 (accessed 18 October 2018).

individuals and organizing them domestically and internationally. These characteristics have earned the CPPCC the tag decorative “flower vase” (花瓶 *huaping*) in colloquial usage, pointing to its obviously very limited meaning and mere window-dressing function. [6] By scholars, the CPPCC has been characterized as one of the platforms the one-party state uses to safeguard support for its policy agenda and rule: Through institutionalized consultation with a limited selection of social groups, under a quasi-democratic pretense, in the view of some of these observers the CPPCC contributes to elite *cooptation* (Chen 2015; Dickson 2008) and potentially to what is referred to as *authoritarian regime resilience* (Sun, Zhu and Wu 2014) in China.

Yet, systematic research on the CPPCC is sparse. There is, for example, not a single English-language monograph on the institutional history of the CPPCC. Besides Yan Xiaojun’s 2011 article, an exemplary pioneer study of the workings of one local PPCC in Hebei Province, the few existing shorter studies of the CPPCC usually focus on quite specific aspects, such as biographies of, or specific groups among the members (entrepreneurs, celebrities), statistics of its outputs (proposals), etc. In our study we therefore take one step back and look at the CPPCC system as a whole and its current status and function in the Chinese political system. Based on the institution’s self-conceptualization, we analyze its apparent core functions, *representation* and *consultation*, in theory and – preliminary – practice. Intriguingly, neither the criteria for representativeness of members of the CPPCC nor the ways they are expected to exert their consultative tasks were ever defined in specific and transparent terms. We therefore reconstruct what is known about the evolution of the CPPCC as a party-external forum for consultation supposed to help the policy-making process, the composition of the CPPCC member body and its development over time, the discernible logic behind the selection of CPPCC representatives and the guiding principles and form of their work, based on existing primary and secondary sources on the CPPCC and our own empirical data.

This analysis, we hope, will help to shed light on modes of political inclusion (and exclusion) under an authoritarian regime. *Political inclusion* is broadly understood here as semantics and institutional arrangements by which political systems define and create the possibilities and forms of individual and collective membership and activities accessible to its members (Ahlers and Stichweh 2017; Stichweh 2016, Ch. 4-6). This perspective embraces our assumption that whereas the CPPCC system does not in any way represent a form of a modern, democratically (that is, egalitarian and individuality-based) inclusive platform for political representation and participation, it may still fulfill a political function and produce tangible effects – and these are well worth exploring further. In sum, our interpretation is that the CPPCC system embodies the CCP’s traditional preference for differential political inclusion, [7] which equates social status with political importance and capability, and bets on the cooptation of elites. Beyond that, however, the deliberately non-transparent and flexible selection criteria and work guidelines for the CPPCC are a huge constraint but can also be a resource for its delegates when defining their own role and function. Their public show of adherence to the Party and its policies is supposed to lend symbolic legitimacy to the regime and it often yields personal benefits for CPPCC representatives. Yet, at the same time there are avenues for limited political agency, as we will mention, for those among them who – for whatever reason – understand their mandate in terms of helping CCP policies expand in order to cover more and/or other members of society. Ultimately, we hope that our basic study here can serve as a platform for future research, for which we provide some suggestions, in order to further our understanding of the underlying ideological and functional logic of the Chinese political system.

[6] Another popular saying goes “National People’s Congress members raise their hands, CPPCC members clap their hands” (人大举举手、政协拍拍手 *renda jujushou, zhengxie paipaishou*).

[7] For an interesting portrayal of the history of regarding society as consisting of non-equal groups and the resulting differential modes of governing in China, see, for example, Shue 2018; Treiman and Walder 2019.

The empirical basis for this article emerges from work conducted for a research project on forms of political inclusion in authoritarian regimes and an individual study of the institutional history of the CPPCC, [8] hosted and financed by the University of Oslo. It builds upon preliminary findings from two rounds of ethnographic field research, conducted by the lead author in 2017 and 2018. The search for informants was conducted on the basis of personal contacts and the snow-balling method and has so far resulted in 15 semi-structured in-depth interviews with members of CPPCCs at the national level, as well as the sub-provincial city and city-level PPCCs in Zhejiang Province. We further draw on related reporting in PRC media from 1949 until today, information gathered from the (C)PPCCs' websites, Party and government publications, including biographical information and obituaries, and a review of scholarly work on the CPPCC.

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2. JUST ANOTHER HISTORICAL REMNANT?

What are the origins of the CPPCC system? The predecessor to the present-day CCP-led CPPCCs is the Kuomintang's (KMT) People's Political Council (PPC). Operating between 1938 and 1948, the council was "perhaps the most representative body ever assembled in National China" (Fung 2006, 161); although it lost this status when oppositional voices were excluded from meetings. By January 1948, the CCP had started preparations for its own version of a consultative council. In May 1948 the CCP sent out the "May 1st call" (五一口号 *wuyi kouhao*), urging, among other things, "all democratic parties, various people's organizations, and various social elites to quickly convene a political consultative meeting to discuss and realize the convening of the people's congresses and the establishment of a democratic coalition government!". [9] When 38 non-CCP groups, in exchange for pledging their allegiance to the CCP, accepted the invitation, Mao Zedong hailed it as a democratic version of the KMT's PPC (Groot 2004, 51). Following the agenda that had been set in advance, after nine days of meetings starting on 21 September 1949, the CPPCC passed the Organic Law of the CPPCC, the Organic Law of the Central People's Government, the Common Program, and endorsed the new national flag, the national anthem, and a new calendar (Groot 2004, 163). With the ensuing official founding of the People's Republic of China under the aegis of the CCP on 1 October 1949, the CPPCC had effectively concluded its role as an organ of state power. However, it was not dissolved and its immediate transformation into a core institution of the CCP's United Front made sure its existence was ensured "for a long time to come".

The relationship between the consultative conferences and the United Front, and in particular the United Front Work Department (UFWD), clarifies why the conferences are not, in fact, "just another historical remnant", and how this shaped the developmental trajectory they took since 1949. Set up by the CCP in 1942, the UFWD is an agency tasked with managing elite individuals and organizations within and outside of the PRC. From the very start,

[8] See <https://www.hf.uio.no/ikos/english/people/aca/chinese-and-korean-studies/temporary/rebekksa/index.html>.

[9] Exclamation point in the original, see: <http://www.cppcc.gov.cn/2011/12/16/ART1513333598602528.shtml>.

the different organizations assembled under the roof of the CPPCC and their leaders were under the control of the UFWD. This already points to the CPPCC's main functions: forging the Party-state's corporatist relationship with mass organizations, intermediation between the state and societal groups, and all sorts of other general United Front work (Groot 2012, 30; Wang and Groot 2018). In recent years, under president Xi the "magic weapon" (法宝 *fabao*) [10] has again been reinvigorated, and the UFWD added 40,000 new employees in 2014. [11]

The United Front framework underlines, among other things, the importance of political loyalty. [12] Under the umbrella of the United Front, the CPPCC is supposed to assemble support, special skills, and knowledge in order to sustain the rule of the Communist Party. According to official CPPCC portrayals and United Front statutes, members of the CPPCC are supposed to exert a "bridging" – or in other words: intermediary – function, enabling communication between the people and the government. [13] Especially in the early phase, a particular understanding of this bridging logic made it possible for the Party to use CPPCC members as role models for promoting state campaigns and as a means to spread the CCP's influence and exhort pressure on potential opponents when needed (Van Slyke 1967, 215). The UFWD keeps control of the CPPCC's activities and selects its members as we will describe later. In line with United Front ideology, the members to the consultative conferences have been those in the "wavering middle", i.e. those who were neither members of the CCP nor outright "opponents". This form of top-down selection has historically not been considered a serious attempt at including people in solving problems, but has more to do with the Party-leaders mending ties with the intelligentsia and keeping it under control (Van Slyke, 1967).

After the Mao era, however, changes in the CPPCC seem to be better explained as a classic case of how a Leninist institution at some point comes to terms with structural changes in modern society (Jowitt 1991). One feature of this is the turn from an "exclusionary" to an "inclusionary" orientation. As the Party abandons class struggle for the sake of economic modernization, the cooptation of new personnel ensures new ideas, experiences and resources (such as political support), and control over those who pose a threat to the organization, as Dickson put it (2000; 2003, 91). Yan Xiaojun, furthermore, speaks of "inclusive regime institutions" as becoming a vital part of the Party's persistence (Yan 2011). This observation implies that the Party relies less on coercion and propaganda to control society, and instead develops links with other organizations, leaving the Party in charge of arbitrating competing interests, while organizations enjoy limited interest-articulation (Dickson 2000). Corporatism, or state corporatism, as it is often called in the PRC, and in particular in descriptions of the CPPCC, thus refers to the state forming unequal partnerships with these representative organizations, channeling them into the policy-making process with some, albeit limited, opportunity of influence (Unger and Chan 1996, 112-17).

[10] The United Front was one of three "magic weapons" developed by Mao Zedong in the 1920s and 1930s that were supposed to secure the CCP's victory during the civil war.

[11] See "The Expansion of the United Front Under Xi Jinping". *China Story Yearbook*, 2015, <https://www.thechinastory.org/yearbooks/yearbook-2015/forum-ascent/the-expansion-of-the-united-front-under-xi-jinping/> (accessed 1 January 2019).

[12] See e.g. "Tao Minglun: Zhengzhi jianding yewu jingtong zuofeng guoying" (Tao Minglun: Political firmness, professional proficiency and excellent style), *CPC News*, 30 May 2015.
<http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2015/0530/c64102-27080069.html> (accessed 1 January 2019).

[13] In Chinese: 老百姓跟政府的一个沟通桥梁 *laobaixing gen zhengfu de yi ge goutong qiaoliang*.

3. INCORPORATING ELITES: FROM CLASS STRUGGLE TO THE INCLUSION OF NEW SOCIAL STRATA

Who are, then, these people who are “coopted” by way of the consultative conferences? And how can we understand the relationship between the Party, CPPCC members, and the people/interests they are supposed to represent?

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Throughout the Mao era, especially intellectuals (知识分子 *zhishi fenzi*) and other non-Party elites were targets of United Front efforts to cultivate support and unity. Excluded from formal types of political representation, under the framework of the CPPCC they were offered the opportunity to voice their opinions within given boundaries set by the Party-state. For instance, during Mao’s “Hundred Flower Campaign” in 1956, delegates sent to the CPPCC were guaranteed a platform where they could speak freely under the condition that they accepted criticism in return (Groot 2004, 40). While these elites were initially skeptical, the CCP regime ensured their participation through building personal connections and trust, and by helping them maintain their status and privilege (Eddy 2012). This construct lasted, however, only less than a year, until 1957, when many fell victim to the subsequent Anti-Rightist purges. [14]

After an ensuing period of near extinction and then actual closure of the CPPCC during the Cultural Revolution, the Deng era marks an inclusionary turn in Chinese politics, as scholars such as Dickson (2000; 2003) and Yan (2011) observe. Since the late 1970s a reinvigoration of the United Front’s eight other parties took place, which entailed also a potentially greater role for the CPPCC. At its Third Plenum in December 1978, the CCP abandoned class struggle in order to pursue economic modernization, and the Central Committee of the CCP reported also that the intellectuals’ “situation was under control”. [15] The number of participants in the consultative conferences was increasing steadily. At the fifth national-level CPPCC (1978-1983) especially one group suddenly grew significantly, namely the one consisting of “especially invited personages”. This group made up 993 of a total 1,988 members in these five years, suggesting an eagerness on the part of the CCP to “ease tension and solidify control” in an increasingly open and diversified society at the beginning of the Deng era (Yu 2015, 443). However, looking into the background of these delegates one can quickly see that members of this newly selected group often had a common denominator that calls into question their ‘diversity’: in fact, of the 993 “especially invited personages” at least 400 were already members of the CCP upon entering the CPPCC and more than 25 joined the CCP during the five years immediately afterwards. [16]

A more significant shift took place with the 6th CPPCC (1983), when the Party effectively introduced measures to cap the percentage of CCP members at 40%, making room for more representatives from the other parties, non-party personages and “patriots” from

[14] This includes the before-mentioned head of the UFWD, Li Weihan.

[15] “Zhongguo zhongyang zuzhi bu guanyi luoshi dang de zhishi fenzi zhengce de ji dian yijian” (Opinions of the CCP Central Committee Organization Department on Implementing the Party’s policies towards intellectuals), *CPC News*, 3 January 1978, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64184/64186/66706/4495781.html> (accessed 5 May 2018).

[16] This is according to biographical data we compiled; available upon request.

Taiwan and Macao. [17] 1983 also marked the year when eleven foreign-born naturalized PRC citizens who had “worked a long time for the Chinese revolution and construction” were invited to join the CPPCC. [18] In addition, foreshadowing developments to come, work reports from this period increasingly emphasized the prospects of the CPPCC for contributing to steering the incipient economic development of China. [19] An important part of the CCP’s inclusionary turn, is, according to Dickson (2003, 9), the cooptation of private entrepreneurs and technical elites and the creating of associations linking state and society. And indeed, the Jiang era witnessed the introduction of “economics circles” in the consultative conferences, which already in 1993 effectively integrated a group previously excluded from Party and government positions: private entrepreneurs. Almost ten years prior to the introduction of Jiang Zemin’s “Three Represents” (三个代表 *sange daibiao*) in 2001/2002, [20] the consultative conferences were welcoming wealthy business-people and promoting entrepreneurial skills of representatives, fundamentally at odds with the CCP’s traditional status as a class-based party that was exclusively representing workers, peasant, and soldiers’ interests.

It can be observed that this new economic elite has indeed been eager to join the CPPCC. Initially, for this group the consultative conferences offered a way to cultivate formal and informal ties with officials, which helped them obtain resources and circumvent regulations, secure tax deductions and obtain protection for their businesses – in short: it represented an institutional response to state, market and legal failures (Li, Meng and Zhang 2006, 560-563). While the entrepreneur group’s policy proposals were rarely implemented, the conferences offered the opportunity of voicing collective statements reflecting the group’s demands (Yu 2015). Sometimes they were successful, reportedly when, as early as in the 1970s, Guangdong’s provincial PPCC raised the idea of creating Special Economic Zones, [21] or when the introduction of a property rights law, that was first raised in the CPPCC in 2001, was put on the agenda of the National People’s Congress (NPC), and was finally passed in 2007 (Chen 2016, 327). Yet, few would argue that those invited to join the consultative conferences, or at least those who accept the invitation, are very representative of the general population of private entrepreneurs in the PRC. Existing research shows that, to the contrary, those who join the conference display high economic and entrepreneurial status: big firms, more fixed assets, and continuous success (Dickson 2008, Chen and Dickson 2010, Peng 2014, Chen et.al 2008). It appears that their inclusion into the conferences largely comes down to their status as business owners. Indeed, existing research underlines this; for instance, the study by Chen (2016) who is quoting from her interview with one such CPPCC delegate: “once you sell the enterprise, you will not be a

[17] See “Gonggu he fazhan zhonghua minzu de da tuanjie – zhuhe zhengxie liu jie yici huiyi kaimu (shelun)” (Consolidating and developing the great unity of the Chinese nation- Congratulations on the opening of the first meeting for the six circles of the CPPCC (Editorial)), *Renmin Ribao*, 4 June 1983.

[18] These eleven were: Israel Epstein (German born in Poland), Sidney Shapiro (American), Rut Weiss (Austrian), Elisabeth Li (Russian), Ma Haide (George Hatem, American-Lebanese; had already been (the first foreign) member since 1978), Hans Müller (German), Betty Chandler (American), Eva Siao (German), Richard Frey (Austrian), Guo Yuefang (Japanese) and Guo Anna (Japanese). Most notably perhaps, Sidney Shapiro remained a member until 2010. See *Beijing Review* 26, no. 25, 20 June 1983.

[19] See “Hu Zì’ang zai di liu jie quanguo zhengxie changwei hui gongzuo baogao zhong zhichu – zhengxie gongzuo wei jingji ji-anshe fuwu dayoukeyi” (Hu Zì’ang points out in the work report of the Standing Committee of the sixth CPPCC National Committee – the work of the CPPCC is very promising for economic construction), *Renmin Ribao*, 26 March 1985.

[20] The concept of the Three Represents was introduced by Jiang Zemin and refers to a guiding ideology whereby the CCP should represent the development trends of *advanced productive forces*, *advanced culture*, and the *interests of the overwhelming majority* of the Chinese people. Inclusion of the “advanced productive forces” in this formula was seen as the most significant change, as it meant basically the private production sector, i.e. private entrepreneurs. This ideological reform is largely seen as symbolizing the Party’s final turn from an exclusive and revolutionary party to a catch-all sort of people’s party, with crucial implications also for political practice in China. See, for example, Holbig 2006, also on the reactions to and the ensuing revision of the concept.

[21] See “The United Front in an age of shared destiny”. *China Story Yearbook*, 2014, <https://www.thechinastory.org/yearbooks/yearbook-2014/forum-begging-to-differ/the-united-front-in-an-age-of-shared-destiny/> (accessed 1 January 2019).

representative any more" (p. 326).

The county-level PPCCs also practice this differential and – here – rather static approach to representativeness, which entails that changing occupation disqualifies delegates from potential renewal of their membership (Yan 2011, 61). Furthermore, in the latest update to the CPPCC Charter (27 March 2018), article 38 now stipulates that if a member changes jobs (s)he "should resign" (应当辞职 *yīngdǎng cíqu*) from the CPPCC. Status, occupational background and personal wealth are now becoming ever more evident markers, and the 13th (2018) national CPPCC invited 59 billionaires to join, including, among others, almost half of the CEO's of Hong Kong's large media companies and other big tycoons. [22] Perhaps as an attempt to counter the resulting elitist reputation of the CPPCC, already in 2008 three migrant workers were invited to join the national CPPCC (Lin 2014, 145). Hence, taken together, the criteria for membership, "representativeness" and identity, nowadays seem to be largely based on occupational, material/economic and popularity status. Some observers even note that especially since the 2000s, the CPPCC appears to have become one of the main vehicles by which the CCP is aiming at a better integration of the country's *new* elites in order to avoid any attempts at creating separate political organizations (Cabestan 2017).

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On a side note, we cannot but add that this section points to a certain puzzle that makes the CPPCC system an even more fascinating case for the study of Chinese politics. The CPPCC's durability, notwithstanding all the socio-political and ideological changes surrounding it, can somehow be read as symbolizing a significant theoretical contradiction in today's CCP ideology and for the legitimization of its institutional manifestations. Since, with the proclamation of the "Three Represents" concept, the CCP now claims to represent (almost all) advanced elements in society, then what use is there still for a non-Party elite advisory body? In other words, first, the CPPCC is supposed to coopt elite groups in society that are not CCP members, but if now almost everybody can become a CCP member if 'advanced' enough, why does the CPPCC as an institution still exist? Second, how does the CCP ideologically square the fact that even though it claims to now represent and incorporate the most advanced elements of society and can, due to its avant-garde character, anyway produce the best and the most authoritative solutions for society's problems, it still obviously still 'needs' a Party-external advisory and intermediary body? While these are exciting questions, we will not be able to present final answers here, due to a different focus and space constraints in this paper and the preliminary nature of our research. We will take them up again in our future analyses, but now first zoom into the CPPCC system again, and ask how members are selected and whom and what they are expected to represent.

[22] In 11th CPPCC (2008), new members included Chan Man Huang (owner of the Hong Kong Commercial Daily), Chan Wing Kee (Chairperson of Asia Television Limited) and Richard Li (son of Li Ka-shing).

4. HONOR OBLIGES? DISCERNIBLE CONCEPTS OF REPRESENTATION IN THE CPPCC

The process of selecting members of the consultative conferences officially rests on *recommendation* (推荐 *tuijian*) of candidates to the UFWD, often by one's workplace or one of the mass organizations. After scrutiny by the UFWD, and final approval by the CCP, these people receive an invitation to join the CPPCC. We still know little about the details of this procedure. It turns out, for instance, that the recommendation process is kept secret even for the potential members themselves, and there is no form of "interview" or otherwise personal encounter taking place before the person is formally invited to join the CPPCC. [23]

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What about their qualifications? As described above, members of the CPPCC are supposed to exert a "bridging" function enabling communication between the people and the government; a formula that reappeared in interviews with CPPCC members across all levels. [24] In particular, with the CCP's recent re-emphasis on the *consultative* element in Chinese politics, [25] and with the CPPCC as the main institutionalized forum for consultation, exactly why those selected for the CPPCC should be best qualified for this work is an interesting question. These deputies are apparently supposed to be able to intermediate between interests present among the people and the (collective) goals of the political regime just by virtue of their high standing and personal qualities. [26] Beyond that, there exists no transparent catalogue of the specific (political) merits a person has to have gained in order to be considered a capable CPPCC delegate and "bridge pier".

Thomas Heberer (2016) characterizes the specific case of the CPPCC, which he touches upon briefly in his comprehensive review of concepts of representation and their application to China, as following the logic of an "estate type" of representation ("Ständevertretung") in the classic Weberian sense (p. 18). Different from historical estates, though, which were constitutive parts of a state and possessed entitlements on the basis of which they claimed participation, we would counter that no such "estates" exist in modern day China. Rather, we can observe, as already mentioned, the CCP's preferential approach to an array of social groups it perceives as politically relevant, and an apparent tendency to focus on diverse elite interests in particular that it tries to coopt. Furthermore, some observers are led to liken the consultative conferences to an "upper house/chamber" or "senate" in bicameral political systems (Li, Meng and Zhang 2006). In a historical perspective this may hold water, since upper houses and senates, too, were often not elected (c.f. the UK and the USA); members were appointed and membership could even be inherited

[23] One informant explained that she had not even been in China when she was notified of her invitation to the CPPCC. Interviews, September 2017 and April 2018.

[24] Interviews, April and July 2018.

[25] See, for instance, in Xi Jinping's statements on the mass line and the reinvigoration of the United Front; Xi Jinping «Zai qin-gzhu zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi chengli 65 zhounian dahui shang de jianghua» (Speech at the celebration of the 65th anniversary of the establishment of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference), *Xinhua*, 21 September 2014, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-09/21/c_1112564804.htm (accessed 16 October 2018).

[26] Compare e.g. descriptions of the *suzhi* concept (translatable as social and political 'quality') in Chinese society and politics, such as those by Kipnis 2006, or Pieke 2010, 2012.

and was based on noble, clerical, or other forms of elite status. Yet, a comparison with contemporary variants of bicameral systems seems unsuitable. Most importantly, however, in the CCP's own logic, the CPPCC is situated outside the formal political structure (Van Slyke 1967, 283) and does therefore not resemble a meaningful "second chamber". [27]

Instead, we would altogether second Heberer's other interpretation of the CPPCC as institutionalizing a type of "mobilized representation" à la Huntington and Nelson (Heberer 2016, 35). This refers to its members as selected and appointed in a top-down fashion by Party authorities without the institutionalization of any form of public election. Mobilized representation moreover implies that these installed representatives do not act spontaneously or within an autonomous realm, a fact that is clearly reflected in CPPCC operations at all levels of the political hierarchy that we observe and describe in more detail below. At the same time, as mentioned, this institution seems to imply that members of some kind of elite or status groups in society (elderly and experienced, famous and renowned, successful, in short: "能人 *nengren*", the "capable") just know best *what, whom and how* to represent. To a large degree, this has been one of the major characteristics of the CPPCC as a political institution, although the composition of its select members has changed quite a lot over the decades. How this type of mobilized representation is supposed to work in practice will be analyzed in more detail below.

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4.1 Self-conceived factors: honor, responsibility, benefit

When asked why they themselves think they had been invited to join the CPPCC, interviewed deputies usually stated to not know anything more about the reasons for their selection than that they were "representative" of some particular groups, and that they (perhaps) possessed some characteristics that made them more capable of expressing the interests of their specific group than others. Some pointed to particular skills, e.g. in formulating themselves in writing, or collecting historical records – a part of CPPCC delegates' work – as a way to show they were sufficiently useful. Others said that their membership in one of the other officially recognized parties was probably the main reason, "even though there are many others who could probably do a better job". [28] In fact, due to the institution's goal of ensuring numerical representation, in particular from the eight other political parties, those who join these parties still have relatively easier access to the CPPCC. At all levels, membership in one of the other eight official Chinese political parties is definitively a criterion for the grouping of individuals in the CPPCC. [29]

Moreover, while CPPCC representatives may not enjoy the same relationship to those they are supposed to represent as NPC deputies do, they report similar forms of self-importance. Research has shown that for NPC-members this self-importance stems from institutionalized formal powers (Manion 2015; 2017), while CPPCC-members seem to gain their sense of self-importance from the official and self-proclaimed "honor" that this position brings. Membership mirrors social status and "face" (Schubert and Heberer 2017). Informants almost unanimously brought up the honorific aspect involved in being selected to join the CPPCC. This may also explain some of the rationale behind joining an institution that does not offer any wage or immediate economic benefits to them. [30] For some, the

[27] It is definitely fruitful to compare the CPPCC system to consultative bodies in historical political systems around the world, but this goes beyond the possibilities of this paper.

[28] Interviews with members local PPCCs, Zhejiang Province, April and July 2018.

[29] These parties are specifically restricted from recruiting students, workers, peasants or soldiers (学工农兵 *xue gong nong bing*), as these groups are, in theory, already represented by the CCP.

honor of participating in a consultative process means an opportunity or even obligation to present their opinions in a forum where *some* have to listen to *what* they say. But, at the same time, joining the CPPCC entails responsibilities (责任 *zeren*), a fact that members are very aware of. Beyond the abstract task of “bridging” between the Party state and society, these responsibilities can sometimes take very concrete, material forms: In PPCCs, business owners, for example, are commonly pressured to spend more money on donations and are apportioned charges by the local government (Sun, Zhu and Wu 2014). The term “organization clientelism” has been used to describe local officials making use of PPCCs to mobilize social resources to finance the implementation of their policy tasks (*idem.*). The extensive studies of (private) entrepreneurs’ activities in the CPPCC also point to its function as a networking club and, moreover, an institutionalized communication and lobbying channel into local or national governments (Chen 2015). For the intellectual elite, the reputation boost improves their chances for joining the Chinese Academy of Sciences, for instance (Cao 1999).

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4.2 Whom and how to represent?

While there is no “constituency”-representation in the CPPCC, once they accept, members are divided into 34 functional groups, i.e. mainly policy areas. These also include the eight other political parties, sectors and associations, in addition to ten so-called “special committees” (专门委员会 *zhuanmen weiyuanhui*), meant to embody the representation of allegedly important groups and issues. [31] The selection of these members is officially legitimated by their “broadly representative” features, and their specific *representativeness* displayed by the organization of the CPPCC in different “circles” (界别 *jiebie*). These placements are supposed to be reflecting the person’s background, i.e. field of expertise, but are also sometimes quite inexplicable. Among our informants, a successful businessperson, who was for instance put in the Communist Youth League circle, jokingly described this as a sign that “the CCP must think I look young” – he was 56 years of age. Another private entrepreneur started in the “economics circle”, but was later moved to the All China Women’s Federation circle. Reportedly, members themselves complain about the un-

[30] Interviews with members local PPCCs, Zhejiang Province, April and July 2018.

[31] The ten special committees include 1. Bills and proposals, 2. Economy, 3. Agriculture and rural issues 4. Population, resources and environment, 5. Education, science and sports, 6. Social and legal development, 7. Minorities and religions, 8. Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, and overseas Chinese affairs, 9. Foreign affairs, and 10. Culture and history. The Agriculture and rural issues committee (农业和农村委员会 *nongye he nongcun weiyuanhui*) was added as recently as 2018. For an overview in English see the CPPCC’s official website: <http://www.cppcc.gov.cn/zxww/2012/07/03/ART1341301557203107.shtml>.

even number of representatives to the different groups and fora, [32] which is understood as undermining the purpose of these “circles”. At the same time, some informants expressed a rather pragmatic approach to this issue, and reported to meet frequently with people “across circle lines”. [33] In other words, while the official rhetoric strongly emphasizes the importance and necessity of this form of “circle representation”, some preliminary findings suggest that not only do they appear to be somewhat randomly organized, but members themselves mainly only pay attention to them when meetings are held for specific circles.

This officially constructed but apparently futile form of representation can appear to be part of a window-dressing effort, a point that is not lost to delegates themselves. Some take to complain about the intense and exclusive focus on the CPPCC during the “two sessions” (see also below). With constant reporting in the news media, their “honorary” position would be strengthened, while their reported impact on policy remained slim, these informants stated. [34] Moreover, not only do delegates match actually unwritten criteria, but they also have to come to terms with the lot of “mobilized representation” which is equally undefined. Thomas Heberer labelled this officially legitimated and expected logic of representation as what is – somewhat oddly – called *gyroscopic* in political science, which implies “the sense of representing overarching interests such as those of the nation rather than those of particularistic groups” (2016, 36). He finds this concept especially relevant for the case of political organizations in China, since, like other authoritarian regimes which lack meaningful elections, the CCP system of rule seems to build on the idea, arguably, that – where relevant – “representatives act on the basis of their own experiences, i.e. with less responsiveness and more independent judgements” (*ibid.* 14). We agree that this explains why circle or work group assignments under the roof of the CPPCC or the rather ambiguous and flexible belonging of the individual delegate to a social or interest group and a representativeness derived thereof is not based on (voting or non-voting) constituencies. Even more challenging is that, whereas a somehow ascribed status or elite-ness is the blurry criterion for appointment to the CPPCC, in their actual work CPPCC members are not necessarily expected to act according to a (rational) group identity and interest. Rather, they are ideally supposed to behave like advanced-minded, omnipotent individuals with a sense for specific issues the ruling party needs to be advised on in order to advance the national interest, or the wellbeing of the political collectivity.

However, even these processes seem to be – and to become more and more – constrained, since outspoken critics are effectively kept out and only those who fit the criteria and can come to terms with the lot of mobilized representation are invited to participate. Tellingly, in response to a question about the purpose of the CPPCC, a former national-level CPPCC member quoted former Chairperson Li Ruihuan in saying “helping out without adding inconvenience” (帮忙, 不添乱 *bangmang, bu tianluan*). The “helping out”, she explained, carried a double meaning: to help the government avoid trouble, and to help by raising good proposals. [35] Most recently, the principle of “whoever recommends someone is responsible for this person” (谁推荐, 谁负责 *shei tuijian, sheifuze*) has been underlined in official CPPCC reports. [36] This in turn puts even more pressure on both the process of recommendation, as well as on those who are finally approved to join in. But, as one dele-

[32] See “Zhengxie weiyuan: xianzai wenyi jie tai duo weiyuanle, genben bu xuyao name duo” (CPPCC-member: There are too many members in the literary and artistic circles, there is no need for all of them), *Ifeng News*, 10 March 2012, http://news.ifeng.com/mainland/special/2012lianghui/detail_2012_03/10/13098132_0.shtml (accessed 2 January 2019).

[33] Interviews, April 2018.

[34] Interview with PRC author on the possible influence of other well-known authors in the CPPCC, August 2018.

[35] Interview with a former member of the national CPPCC, September 2017. Chinese authors, accordingly, occasionally use the neologism “political harmony” (政谐 *zhengxie*) when characterizing the CPPCC and its work ‘culture’. This is a compilation of the term 政协 (*zhengxie*, consultation) and 和谐 (*hexie*, harmony), resulting in a phonetic equivalent to the Chinese word for “consultation” used in CPPCC; see e.g. Jiang 2010, 82.

[36] “Di shisan jie quanguo zhengxie weiyuan mingdan xingcheng” (The formation of members to the 13th National Committee of the CPPCC), *CPPCC*, http://cppcc.china.com.cn/2018-01/25/content_50299042.htm (accessed 27 August 2018).

gate quoted in a Chinese media report remarked: “once you chose to accept the offer, it is best not to complain [about this system]”. [37]

Other aspects worth mentioning pertain to “dual” purposes or offices of CPPCC representatives – mostly facilitated by, but also odd given the fact that the CPPCC is not part of the core party-state structure. Delegates can, for instance, hold more than one seat, and members of a PPCC at the provincial level in particular occasionally hold dual office in the CPPCC and the NPC or local PCs. In other instances, CPPCC members are taking on foreign policy tasks, for instance, when leaders, vice-chairpersons or members of the Foreign Affairs Committee are sent abroad to conduct so-called “public diplomacy” (公共外交 *gong waijiao*). [38]

Altogether, this means that (C)PPCC members are endowed with a rather unclear mandate, it seems. They are supposed to help the policy-making process on the basis of their avant-garde capabilities without crossing any politically sensitive red lines or: challenging the legitimacy and hegemony of the Communist Party, respectively. So, what are CPPCC delegates’ tasks and how do they actually go about fulfilling them – if we do assume for a moment that it is not all a completely empty act?

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5. BETWEEN CIRCUS AND CIRCLES: REPRESENTATIVES' WORK IN THE CPPCC

We now turn to the discernible actual work that goes on in the CPPCC. For the Chinese public, images of the CPPCC are mainly generated by news reporting which happens around the “two sessions” meetings. These reports are strictly controlled, and articles are written and pre-approved in advance of the meetings. [39] Sometimes the related news coverage can make for great entertainment in the otherwise mundane reporting on political affairs in China, especially when celebrities and well-known public intellectuals fall asleep during the meetings or agree to selfies with state media journalists. This *circus*, as some describe it, in turn may somewhat influence how CPPCC members are seen and how they view themselves: as representatives for two weeks, but idle when the cameras are off

[37] “Zhang Fengyang: Daibiao he weiyuan shei geng yinggai “fangpao”?” (Zhang Fengyang: People’s Congress delegates or CPPCC-members: Who should set off the biggest blast?), *Ifeng News*, 5 March 2014, http://news.ifeng.com/mainland/special/2014lianghui/riji/detail_2014_03/05/34444769_0.shtml (accessed 11 August 2018).

[38] Many of the members in the Foreign Affairs Committee are former ambassadors, diplomats, and celebrities. See e.g. an interview with Zhao Qicheng (赵启正) from 2012 when he was Director of the Foreign Affairs Committee: http://www.chinatoday.com.cn/chinese/sz/dskzg/201401/t20140122_800023385.html.

[39] Interview with a former state media employee, February 2018. China Digital Times obtained information about what not to report on from the 2016 “Two sessions”, which includes among other things the following rules: “Do not report on delegates’ personal wealth” and “Strictly control negative reports in news media”, see: <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2016/03/minitrue-important-notices-coverage-two-sessions/>.

for the rest of the year. [40] Public TV reports also mainly focus on how previously drafted policies and governmental budgets are just discussed once again, interspersed with pictures of minority representatives crossing People's Square praising the great work of the CPPCC. [41] This is, of course, supposed to invoke images of unity and harmony for the Chinese and even a global audience, but it, at the same time, does not dispel the notion that the CPPCC is a flower vase institution, with only symbolic meaning for the Chinese political system.

Then what is actually going on inside the CPPCC all year round, if at all?

5.1 Contribution to the formulation and evaluation of policies

The official tasks of CPPCC members are proposing policies, "democratic supervision", and "participation in the deliberation of state affairs". According to the CPPCC Charter (updated 2018), these tasks require that members:

1. consult on major national policies, before, during and after implementation;
2. put forward comments, criticisms and suggestions when supervising state organs and their employees;
3. carry out studies and surveys on important issues; and
4. comment and make suggestions, reports, proposals and recommendations to the CCP and state organs. [42]

This task list, in particular, points to the consultative function of the CPPCC, which, theoretically, allows select representatives to inform the policy-making process with original observations and ideas. In effect, beyond publicly staging their annual meeting, the main work of CPPCC members is, as was already briefly mentioned above, to draft policy proposals (提案 *ti'an*), officially the main channel for some kind of interest articulation. Compared to proposal drafting work done by the NPC, members of the CPPCC seem to enjoy more freedom as they can raise proposals at any time during the year, both individually and jointly. Recently, the number of these written proposals is increasing on a yearly basis. Although both official reports and PRC-based scholars complain that these proposals lack professionalism and efficiency, they are still upheld as one, if not the main explanation for why the CPPCC is performing a valuable function in the political system. Proposal production is, in fact, communicated as a requirement, and failing to do so may cause a person to lose membership in the CPPCC, or at least to miss the opportunity to serve consecutive terms. [43] Consequently, since most of the members in the CPPCC have little political experience, they describe being confused as to where they are supposed to send their proposals and which governmental departments they can contact to improve their chances of exposure. [44] Finally, only some of these proposals are made publicly available, though outspoken representatives have taken to publicizing their proposals via social media in

[40] See "Ge Jianxiong: Lianghui qijian wo shi yige "gonggong chanpin"" (Ge Jianxiong: I am a "public product" during the two sessions), *Ifeng News*, 3 March 2014, http://news.ifeng.com/mainland/special/2014lianghui/riji/detail_2014_03/03/34349905_0.shtml (accessed 9 August 2018).

[41] Every year, a list of "best news stories on the CPPCC" is published on its official website, featuring articles, videos and opinion pieces. See e.g. the selection for 2018 here: <http://www.rmxbs.com.cn/zt/goodnews/index.shtml>.

[42] For the English version of the 2018 Charter, see: <http://www.cppcc.gov.cn/zxww/2018/12/27/ARTI1545876942660350.shtml>.

[43] Interviews with members of a county-level city PPCC in Zhejiang Province, July 2018.

advance of plenum debates, reportedly in an effort to stir greater public discussion and gain traction for their opinions. [45]

Proposals usually go through several rounds of deliberation before they are put on paper and passed on to relevant governmental ministries. Members to the conferences report that raising proposals together would strengthen the quality of these inputs and, in extension, increases the opportunity of making their voices heard, since more people are involved in the process. Although one could perhaps expect that membership in the functional groups guides the content or theme of their proposals, selecting topics to comment on or issues to raise suggestions about is left at delegates' own discretion. At the same time, the delegates seem to be aware that their occupational background carries weight in this process and tend to stay somewhat within the lines of their specific professional knowledge.

A study of proposals made public between 2008 and 2012 showed that the three most popular areas were the Three Rural Issues (三农 *sannong*; i.e. agricultural modernization, village infrastructure, and rural residents' livelihoods; in short: rural development), health care and minority issues (Yu 2015, 440). A report for 2017/18 groups CPPCC proposals as belonging to the issue of economic development (36.35%), social/society development (32.58%), political development (9.85%), ecological protection (9.08%), cultural development (7.57%), and varia (4.57%). [46] While these proposals reflect issues that are broadly representative of general public concern, it is hard to evaluate whether they make a tangible difference. Critics refer to the proposal drafting activity in the CPPCC as a largely one-way process of policy enforcement with the political purpose of maintaining Party hegemony: only proposals oriented at the official policy line have a chance to succeed (Wang and Groot 2018, 571). On the basis of the CPPCC's self-conception and the mentioned 2018 Central Committee Opinion on the Conduct of the CPPCC, it can be expected that any 'creativity' is only further stifled now. Yet, it is not impossible that proposals trigger policy reforms, as the example of the property rights law, suggested by private entrepreneur circles in the CPPCC, shows. This was even more surprising given that CPPCC proposals aimed at structural or legal revisions are rarely answered. [47] Then again, orthodoxy is not necessarily guaranteeing success: Even Xi Jinping's wife, Peng Liyuan, who served in the CPPCC consecutively between 1993 and 2012, has seen her proposals, though perfectly in line with acknowledged "issues of public concern", fall short of implementation (Jeffreys 2016).

[44] "Ge Jianxiaong: Yu Zhengsheng suoduan fa yan shijian xiwang duo ting weiyuan de" (Ge Jianxiong: Yu Zhengsheng shortens his speaking time. He wants to listen to committee members), *Ifeng News*, 4 March 2014, http://news.ifeng.com/mainland/special/2014lianghui/riji/detail_2014_03/04/34417548_0.shtml (accessed 10 August 2018). [45] E.g. Jiang Hong (蒋洪), a member of the Chinese Kuomintang and professor of finance at Shanghai University of Finance and Economics, who became well-known to the public after refusing to participate in the CPPPC's voting process because of its "un-democratic characteristics". See e.g. his "lianghui qinli riji" (personal diary of the two sessions) at http://news.ifeng.com/mainland/special/2014lianghui/riji/detail_2014_03/08/34570720_0.shtml (accessed 15 August 2018).

[46] "Quanguo zhengxie ti'an shencha weiyuanhui guanyu guanyu ti'an shencha qingkuang de baogao" (Report of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference proposal review committee on the review of proposals), *Xinhua Daily Telegraph*, 16 March 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/mrdx/2018-03/16/c_137042748.htm (accessed 12 August 2018).

[47] "Jiang Hong: Sheji zhidu falv deng dingceng wenti de ti'an nan dedao huiying" (Jiang Hong: Proposals related to top-level issues such as institutional law rarely receive a response), *Ifeng News*, 7 March 2014, http://news.ifeng.com/mainland/special/2014lianghui/riji/detail_2014_03/07/34548651_0.shtml (accessed 10 August 2018).

5.2 Reflecting on “social conditions and public opinions”

Another aspect of delegates’ work, which is considerably less publicized, yet seems valuable for evaluating the CPPCC’s efforts, is “reflecting” (反映 *fanying*) “social conditions and public opinions” (社情民意 *sheqing minyi*). These documents differ from the above-mentioned proposals in terms of both content and form. They tend to reflect smaller, more pressing local issues that can be handled immediately, and take the form of short summaries of these issues, including some suggestions on how to solve the problem. Although these opinions are often limited to the conditions in a certain locality, if they are considered important and general enough, they can gain traction at higher echelons of the CPPCC system, or be transmitted directly to the relevant ministry or CCP unit, according to interviewees. [48] The process of reflecting these opinions has been described as the main “window” (口 *kou*) for the public to contribute with input into policy-making that concerns them directly. Many local PPCCs have set up specific websites, email addresses, or direct links on their homepages to promote this kind of consultation work. The formula is quite simple: one has to point out a problem, come up with a solution, and preferably give some “scientific reference”. The proposal committee then discusses the content and sends these reflections to the relevant government department or party committee. In contrast to policy proposals, these reflections do not necessarily trigger a response; in fact, they most often do not. [49] However, they are still an important part of (C)PPCC representatives’ work – one that sometimes translates into financial rewards, and in other times is used to keep a check on members to ensure that they are actively taking part in the “activities of the CPPCC”.

Studying these documents and their history, in particular at the local levels, may therefore not only help to understand *what* CPPCC members are paying attention to and *how* they suggest to tackle problems of local governance. They also show how delegates formulate these opinions and reveal how they refer to *what* and *whom* they are intending to represent. A preliminary analysis of a corpus of local “opinions” shows, for instance, that “the masses” are in fact often evoked in these texts. This is, first of all, not particularly surprising, since it repeats traditional CPPCC speak and it is the official purpose of these ‘opinions’ to ensure that “the masses are kept satisfied”. [50] But how are the “masses” defined in a local setting and with regard to a very specific problem? How do the authors of opinions gather information, how do they select and prioritize? Do their depictions reflect the factual situation at hand and how is that evaluated and by whom? The documents also show that delegates must argue very precisely and document quite thoroughly what the problem is, and that they are expected to provide rather complex suggestions in order to solve it. Altogether, more in-depth analysis of these proposals and the whole process leading up to them is needed, as this may, for instance, reveal a lot about what mobilized, gyroscopic representation and consultation work in the CPPCC is oriented at: only predefined central policy lines, or innovative proposals based on original observations.

[48] Interviews with members of sub-provincial and county-level city PPCCs in Zhejiang Province, April and July 2018.

[49] According to the local head of the proposal committee of a Zhejiang Province PPCC, interviewed in July 2018.

[50] “Fanying sheqing minyi -- zhong zai «fanying»” (Reflecting social conditions and public opinions – the focus is on “reaction”), 16 April 2010, N.A. (accessed August 20, 2018).

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS AND OUTLOOK

The CPPCC has developed in line with the CCP regime over the past seventy years, starting with the political incorporation of non-Party elites in 1949. As a platform of the United Front, the CPPCC has ever since been supposed to bring together support, special skills and knowledge for bolstering the continued rule of the Communist Party. Selection practices and propaganda show that these qualities are obviously mainly to be found among representatives of a somewhat high (including intellectual and ideological) status, and increasingly among China's economic elite, only underlining the Party's traditional preference for differential political inclusion, equating social status with political importance and capability. The CPPCC is seen by many as a vehicle for coopting these elites in Chinese politics. But little is known about the actual representation formulas applied and the work conducted within the CPPCC.

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At first sight, the CPPCC is based on merely symbolic representation, at least when norms of direct or substantive representation (i.e. of a given social group, particular interests, or a specific constituency) are taken as a basis. Lacking formal autonomy and visible activity, the CPPCC mostly has the features of a propaganda show: Exhibiting that society's crème de la crème still accepts the invitation to join the CPPCC and rubberstamps pre-defined policies during their pompous conventions is to signal that everything is more or less working flawlessly under CCP rule. Scholarly interest in the CPPCC can end there. However, if we assume that the CCP regime is eventually aiming at securing societal feedback through its intermediary bodies for the very pragmatic goals of information gathering, discursive hegemony, and the maintenance of responsiveness and eventually performance legitimacy, it is probably worth looking more closer both at the CPPCC's representation concept and practices, and how this is (or is not) translated into actual conduct.

As we have shown in our overview, the CPPCC system appears to be rather irrelevant as a political platform for particularistic representation, though possibly useful for dispensing favorable treatments to certain parts of the Chinese population. In addition, we would go as far as to state that the CPPCC offers an opportunity for *voice*, although seriously limited and dependent. Working towards preserving harmony at all costs while at the same time bringing about policy innovation is a somewhat paradoxical expectation that CPPCC delegates face. Lacking constituencies, systematic work committees or reliable guidelines (beyond the rule that one has to be loyal to the Party and adhere to the Party lines), but pressurized to deliver some sort of input, they have to come to terms with their consultancy task. In the best case, this can result in proactive reporting that can keep the governing authorities abreast of political matters that they – in the absence of democratic feedback mechanisms – might otherwise fail to notice and tackle. In other cases, the CPPCCs are just used as fora where CCP speak is being parroted by a colorful bunch of elite personae more or less connected to the Party, hoping that this lends symbolic legitimacy to the regime.

A look at proposals and opinions coming out of the national and local level PPCCs can be a relevant indicator to study this further, as we have explicated. They may suggest that PPCCs are not merely business clubs and more than decorative flower vases, but also that we lack sufficient insight into the processes leading up to the drafting of such opinions and their careers in the political system. Furthermore, research is needed to determine CPPCC members' actual agency and the orientation of representation and consultation under the roof of the CPPCC that may help us to decide whether the CPPCC can actually be taken seriously as a consultative body in contemporary Chinese politics. This is of interest for students of Chinese politics, both theoretically, when striving to trace the evolution of CCP ideology and political concepts, as well as empirically, when following if and how these ideas are reflected in political practice and with what effect.

Finally, this study of the CPPCC contributes to the systematic study of political inclusion with empirical insights from one of the most significant autocracies in today's world society. The CPPCC is an interesting case even among the different political institutions in China. More than any of the other Chinese institutions it does not even pretend anymore to mirror the dominant semantics and procedures found globally in other contemporary political systems, especially democratic variants. Instead seems to represent (and conceives itself as) an institution *sui generis*, which rests on selection (instead of election), mobilized representation (instead of autonomous organization and interest articulation), "research" (rather than direct or indirect representation), and "cooperation" and "consultation" (instead of competition, debate, etc.). Shifts in the CPPCC's membership composition over time testify to the enormous socio-economic and political changes that China went through during the last decades, and to the related attempt at including ever more diversified elites who are on the one hand seen as a potential risk and contenders to the ruling party, and on the other hand as the supposedly politically most apt members of society not included in the Party. Their paradoxical mandates and the strict rules of conduct within a corridor drawn by the CCP regime mean a relatively constrained room for activity of CPPCC members. Rather unsurprisingly, the CPPCC therefore clearly reflects some of the many prerequisites and constraints that exist for political inclusion in authoritarian contexts. At the same time, however, this case can also serve to show how modern autocracies constantly react to the challenge of political inclusion and how they, in this process, are continuously forced to create new forms and possibilities of individual and collective membership. At the bottom line, notwithstanding all systemic limitations, even the evolution of such a curious institution as the CPPCC is a story of expansion(s): reflected in the diversification of the selected elites, in the array of issues observed and suggested for processing by the political system, and in the variety of addressees targeted or covered by policy adjustments and innovations.

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Trained in both political science and sinology, Anna Ahlers combines these two disciplines in her study of Chinese politics. Her aim is to meticulously describe and analyse the political system of China and its functional characteristics, while avoiding to treat China as singular and incomparable case. Instead, she seeks to integrate insights gained in China into general conceptual foundations for the study of authoritarianism. In previous projects she has, for example, conducted in-depth research on community governance and direct elections in Chinese villages, the administrative system of China, the local implementation of a comprehensive rural development initiative started in 2006, and the societal implications of China's gigantic smog problem. At the moment, Anna Ahlers is drafting a new project that will take a closer look at growing Chinese ambitions to shape the global system of science.

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