

Moving toward Intra-Party Democracy: An Analysis of Democratic Centralism in the Constitution of the Communist Party of China

DING Hui

*Auf dem Weg zu Innerparteilicher Demokratie: Eine Analyse
des Demokratischen Zentralismus in der Verfassung der Kommunistischen Partei Chinas*

Dieser Aufsatz vertritt die Auffassung, dass sich die Entwicklung des Konzeptes „Innerparteiliche Demokratie“ in der Kommunistischen Partei Chinas (KPCh) an ihrem paradoxen „demokratischen Zentralismus“ ausrichtet. Seit ihrer Gründung ist die KPCh ständig der theoretischen Spannung zwischen ihrem sozialistischen Wesen und ihren demokratischen Bestrebungen ausgesetzt. Die Behandlung dieses fundamentalen Paradoxons von Sozialismus und Demokratie hat sich im Laufe der Zeit gewandelt. Ursprünglich ergab sich der demokratische Zentralismus als eine eklektische Lösung. Später wurde er zum unerschütterlichen Kanon der KPCh als Leninistische Partei und zum Verfassungsprinzip der Volksrepublik. Unter unterschiedlichen politischen Umständen pendelte der demokratische Zentralismus zwischen demokratischem und zentralistischem Pol. Die neuerliche Wiederbelebung innerparteilicher Demokratie erweist sich als Bewegung des demokratischen Zentralismus hin zum demokratischen Pol.

Introduction

The survival and persistence of the Communist Party of China (CPC) is an interesting phenomenon. Not a few scholars and China watchers have predicted it would collapse or adapt to competitive democracy as the Eastern European communist parties did in the 1990s.¹ But today the CPC is still tightly holding state power and remains the single ruling party of a huge nation with the largest population and second largest economy in the world. The CPC also has the world's largest party organization of nearly 80 million members. At the 16th National Party Congress (NPC) in 2002 and the 18th NPC in 2012 two peaceful power successions between generations of party leaders took

1 David Shambaugh: *China's Communist Party. Atrophy and Adaptation* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press; Berkely et al.: University of California Press, 2008), pp. 25–32.

place without any political liquidation. There is no sign that the CPC would choose to follow a model of democratization through competitive party politics. Rather, speeches and articles by party leaders have often and repeatedly stressed that “socialism with Chinese characteristics” led by the CPC would be the only way to realize the great rejuvenation of an old nation while keeping the stability, security and independence of the People’s Republic. To adopt a “westernized” parliamentary democracy is seen as opening a Pandora’s box with a devastating impact on Chinese society.

However, for the CPC, democracy is at least semantically never a taboo for discussion. Noticeably, another type of discourse on democracy takes place within the CPC whereby socialist democracy (*shehui zhuyi minzhu* 社会主义民主) is seen to be one of the fundamental constitutional principles of the People’s Republic guiding the operation of the gigantic party organization. The CPC nevertheless insists that a socialist people’s democracy (*renmin minzhu* 人民民主) is conceptually different from and categorically much more advanced than a bourgeois democracy. Recently, it has advocated a series of new theoretical interpretations of what socialist democracy implies in practice. Intra-party democracy (*dangnei minzhu* 党内民主), which has for decades been embedded in the principle of democratic centralism in the party’s organizational life, at least in the formal formulation of the Party Constitution, has been raised to the public horizon of Chinese political reform. It seems as if the CPC regards intra-party democratization as one decisive and pragmatic step in realizing a socialist people’s democracy while keeping tight control over the direction, content and pace of political reform.

How should we understand this paradoxical claim by the CPC with regard to democracy? Is intra-party democracy just another camouflage by a stubborn dictatorial governing party in resisting a general democratization of the political system in China? Or does it represent experimental-style pragmatic progress without fixed goal-setting like that of the economic reform? Or, more profoundly, does rejection of western parliamentary democracy and advocacy of a socialist people’s democracy through intra-party democracy very likely mean an alternative model of democracy? This article begins with a review of the theoretical controversy over the relationship between socialism and democracy in the early socialist classics. It then provides an analysis of democratic centralism, which stemmed from Leninism in this theoretical battle and was inherited by the CPC in different modified versions of the Party Constitution. I argue that democratic centralism is generally moving from the

centralistic pole to the democratic pole but with periodic reversals back to centralism in the process of transition of the CPC from a revolutionary party to an adaptive governing party. Intra-party democracy serves to interpret this transition and prescribes the framework of China's future political reform.

Democracy and Socialism

The contradictory attitude of the CPC toward democracy can be traced back to the unresolved controversy in the socialist movement over the relationship between socialism and democracy. Originally, democracy was one of the main appeals of socialists to distinguish themselves from both capitalists and liberal aristocrats. However, with regard to realization of the ultimate ideal – emancipation of the proletariat – democracy became a disputable issue dividing socialists into revolutionists and reformists.

Marx and Engels

In the *Communist Manifesto* (1848) Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820–1895) spoke explicitly in favor of violent revolution overthrowing the capitalist regime.² Later in *The Civil War in France* (1871) they made this logic of revolution clearer. As the state would be “nothing but a machine for the oppression of one class by another”,³ the working class could not simply lay hold of ready-made capitalist state machinery to build a “dictatorship of the proletariat”.⁴ Instead, the former state power must be shattered and then replaced by a “new and really democratic state”⁵ that would be totally different from the old capitalist one. In his *Critique of the Gotha Program* (1875) Marx acknowledged the instrumental value of the capitalistic democratic republic where the people's sovereignty was also recognized, because it would be the form of state through which the proletariat could fight the class struggle

2 Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels: “Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei”, in: Id.: *Ausgewählte Schriften* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1970), vol. 1, p. 36.

3 Friedrich Engels: “Einleitung zu: Der Bürgerkrieg in Frankreich”, in: Marx / Engels: *Ausgewählte Schriften*, vol. 1, p. 452.

4 Marx: “Der Bürgerkrieg in Frankreich”, in: Marx / Engels: *Ausgewählte Schriften*, vol. 1, p. 484.

5 Engels: “Einleitung zu: Der Bürgerkrieg in Frankreich”, p. 452.

toward its definitive victory.⁶ However, the final transformation from a capitalist democratic republic to a “really democratic” republic would still be a revolutionary transformation in the form of a revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat, in accordance with the realization of absolute social economic equality.⁷ This means that true proletarian democracy would not develop peacefully from within a capitalist society. Striving for socialism through a parliamentary democracy was then criticized by Marx as “democratic belief in miracles”.⁸ To a certain extent, Marx did not trust parliamentary party competition. To him, true democracy essentially meant self-rule of the emancipated proletariat without any state machinery. The state would finally dissolve in the future after the transitional phase of a proletarian dictatorship. But Marx did not explain whether his proletarian dictatorship meant the abolition of state democracy.⁹ According to Engels’s interpretation, the Paris Commune of 1871 was the first example of a proletarian dictatorship.¹⁰ As the Commune constituted itself on the basis of general franchise, it seemed as if Marx would not oppose democratic election as a founding principle of such a dictatorship by the whole worker class.¹¹ Nevertheless, he cared more about the process toward a communist society free of class oppression and class exploitation in the social economic point of view. It was not his primary concern how a communist democracy would be characterized and operated. This problem was left to his future followers: The social democratic reformists on the one side and the communist revolutionists on the other side.

Revisionists

The European reformists took democracy as one of their central values. They burdened themselves with their devotion to revolutionary thought and their implementation of revisionist action.¹² Regarding the continuous parliamentary success of social democrats such as in Germany and Britain, more

6 Marx: “Kritik des Gothaer Programms”, in: Marx / Engels: *Ausgewählte Schriften*, vol. 2, p. 25.

7 Ibid, p. 24.

8 Ibid, p. 26.

9 Karl Kautsky: *Demokratie oder Diktatur* (Berlin: Paul Cassier, 1920), p. 29.

10 Engels: “Einleitung zu: Der Bürgerkrieg in Frankreich”, p. 457.

11 Marx: “Der Bürgerkrieg in Frankreich”, pp. 491f.

12 Peter Gay: *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism. Eduard Bernstein’s Challenge to Marx* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), p. 62.

European socialists tended to recognize that socialism could also be facilitated or even achieved in capitalism through democratic competition with bourgeois parties. Except for the radical revisionists, they did not entirely deny revolution as a means to establish socialism, as they showed much sympathy for the October Revolution in Russia and the new Soviet Union. However, revolution to them rather meant nonviolent social revolution through “revolutionary propaganda” in the system of parliamentary democracy.¹³ The more effective the existing democratic institutions were in a country, the greater would be the chance to realize the final emancipation of the proletariat in a peaceful way.¹⁴ Democracy was then not seen as being exclusively characterized by the governing class as Marx insisted. Instead, it was regarded as a generally applicable form of state, which could be used to represent a variety of content according to the composition of the people.¹⁵ “Democracy”, as one notorious revisionist argued, “is at the same time means and end. It is the means of the struggle for socialism, and it is the form socialism will take once it has been realized.”¹⁶ The revisionists might have various visions of the collapse of capitalist society. Yet, at least they hold the common belief that socialism should not be achieved at the cost of democracy. Socialism could be realized through democratic evolution and a socialist society must be a democratic society.

Leninists

The Russian revolutionary Leninists rejected this gradualist model of the class struggle of German social democracy.¹⁷ They had no parliamentary institutions or traditions as in Germany and the preconditions for a political democracy through peaceful social change were absent there. Only through revolution would the Czarist despotism be overthrown. And only through revolution would the socialists as a minority in a backward agrarian society impose socialist ideals upon the majority of the people. Professional revolutionaries

13 Karl Kautsky: *Taktische Strömungen in der deutschen Sozialdemokratie* (Berlin: Vorwärts, 1911).

14 Kautsky: *Demokratie oder Diktatur*, p. 26.

15 Karl Kautsky: *Terrorismus und Kommunismus. Ein Beitrag zur Naturgeschichte der Revolution* (Berlin: Verlag Neues Vaterland, 1919), p. 151.

16 Eduard Bernstein: *Die Voraussetzung des Sozialismus und die Aufgabe der Sozialdemokratie* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1920), p. 178.

17 Wladimir Iljitsch Lenin: “Was tun?”, in: Id.: *Werke*, (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1959), vol. 5, p. 378.

would essentially be more mature with regard to their theoretical and practical qualifications than a dependent and backward proletariat. Given this position of a minority, they had no choice but to form a centralistic organization of avant-garde proletarians to educate, agitate and organize the workers and peasants who had no social democratic consciousness and were driven by naïve spontaneity.¹⁸

Consequently, the German model of social democratic mass party organization with a highly exclusive structure was adopted by Lenin (1870–1924) and his followers. But they went further. The party became a small-scale, centralistic organized and well disciplined, secret association of “conspiracy”, in which the pragmatic strategy of efficient and united struggle would outweigh, in the words of Lenin, the “vulgar bauble of democratism”.¹⁹ As a result, to fulfill the double task of overthrowing a nondemocratic monarchy and emancipating the proletariat through violent revolution there would be no room for “empty and damaging” general democratic principles like openness and franchise.²⁰

Bolshevik Democratic Centralism

Lenin’s rejection of formal democracy gave rise to his notion of democratic centralism that later became the organizational principle of the Russian Bolsheviks. Democratic centralism was at the beginning formulated by him as a two-fold stress on “freedom of discussion, unity of action”.²¹ In this framework, democracy meant that party members would have the right to criticize and that secondly the caucus of each organizational level would be elected by the representatives of the lower caucuses. However, centralism was the focus of the revolutionary method of realizing socialism where the imperialist chain had its weakest links. Any public opposition to the central party would be punished and liquidated. That Lenin rejected any conciliation with parliamentary democratic Mensheviks showed that any factional opposition against his revolutionary Bolsheviks would not be tolerated within the framework of “freedom of discussion”. Intra-party democracy was thus definitively subordinated to the centralistic structure of power. Finally, the Bolshevik leadership

18 Ibid, p. 96.

19 Ibid, p. 513.

20 Ibid, pp. 495f.

21 Wladimir Iljitsch Lenin: “Bericht über den Vereinigungsparteitag der SDAPR”, in: Id., *Werke*, vol. 10, p. 384.

instituted a ban on factions in the Russian Communist Party as Resolution No. 12 of the 10th Party Congress in 1921.²² Lenin himself even demanded from his party at the 6th Party Congress of the Bolsheviks in March 1922 that “those who manifested Menshevism publicly must be executed by our revolutionary court”.²³ In pointing out the terrorist character of Leninist democratic centralism in the name of proletarian dictatorship, Karl Kautsky (1854–1938) fiercely criticized that “the hereditary sin of Bolshevism is its suppression of democracy through the regime of dictatorship, which has the unique meaning as unrestricted tyranny of one person or a small organization intimately bound together”.²⁴ Regarding the role of democracy in building a socialist society, Lenin argued that democratic centralism would be the only form before democracy would wither away together with the demise of the state.²⁵ “Absolute centralization and rigorous discipline of the proletariat”, he said, “are an essential condition of victory over the bourgeoisie,”²⁶ who sought to overthrow the proletarian dictatorship again. Therefore, democratic centralism was in 1920 extended from an organizational canon of the Bolshevik Party to a constitutional principle of the Soviet Union.

To a certain extent, the constitutionalization of democratic centralism should be regarded as a Leninist proposal to resolve the theoretical dilemma confronting socialists on how to build a socialist society, given that Marx did not picture what the politics of a future proletarian society should look like except for talking about economic equality. The interpretation of his ambiguous vision of the proletarian dictatorship finally became a watershed between the Russian revolutionists and the German revisionists. In contrast with Kautsky, who believed Marx was in favor of a real democratic republic which would not exclude parliamentary democracy, Lenin insisted that socialism would be a political transition period in which the state could be nothing but the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat in ruthlessly

22 Zhonggong zhongyang Ma En Lie Si bianyiju 中共中央马恩列斯编译局: *Sulian gongchandang daibiao dahui daibiao huiyi he zhongyang quanhui jueyi huibian* 苏联共产党代表大会、代表会议和中央全会决议汇编 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1964), vol. 2, pp. 65f.

23 Wladimir Iljitsch Lenin: “XI. Parteitag der KPR (B)”, in: Id.: *Werke*, vol. 33, p. 269.

24 Kautsky: *Terrorismus und Kommunismus*, p. 144.

25 Wladimir Iljitsch Lenin: “Staat und Revolution”, in: Id.: *Werke*, vol. 31, p. 443.

26 Wladimir Iljitsch Lenin: “Der Linke Radikalismus: Die Kinderkrankheit im Kommunismus”, in: Id.: *Werke*, vol. 31, p. 9.

suppressing counterrevolutionaries.²⁷ A socialist state must then be built upon the centralistic model of the Bolshevik Party into a one-party-rule state where freedom of speech and thinking and public opposition would not be tolerated as they could be utilized by the enemies of the regime.

The Leninist concept of democracy could then be summarized as the imperative of democratic centralism which applied both to internal party life and to state affairs. Further, this model of organization was promoted as a universal value applicable for the world communist movement. At the second Congress of the Communist International in 1920, democratic centralism was regulated under the guidance of Lenin to be the mandatory organizational principle which all communist parties of other countries subordinated to the Comintern must unconditionally obey.²⁸ This imperative command implied that democratic centralism would also have to be constitutionalized in future communist regimes as was the case in the Soviet Union. The following section turns to illustrate this penetrating impact of Leninism on the building of the CPC and its governing practice with regard to the everlasting inherent tension between socialism and democracy.

Democratic Centralism in the Party Constitution of the CPC

The coexistence of two contradictory discourses of the CPC concerning democracy and socialism reflects the endogenous tension of democratic centralism it inherited from the Russian Bolsheviks. Considering the Party Constitution of each session of the NPC, in which the guidelines of the CPC's organizational life are stipulated, one can find that the official formulation of the CPC on democratic centralism has been oscillating between democratic and centralistic tendencies.

Democracy indicators include “democracy” and its variations such as “new democracy” (*xin minzhu zhuyi* 新民主主义), “socialist democracy”, “people’s democracy”, “intra-party democracy”. The centralistic category includes “centralism” (*jizhong* 集中), “solidarity” (*tuanjie* 团结) and “discipline” (*jilü* 纪律). Indicators for revolutionary discourse are “revolution” (*geming* 革命) and “class” (*jieji* 阶级). Table 1 provides supporting data about

27 Ibid, p. 8.

28 Hans Weber: *Die Kommunistische Internationale. Eine Dokumentation* (Hannover: Verlag J. H. W. Dietz Nachf. GmbH, 1966), p. 60.

the frequency of three groups of keywords that appeared in the text of different versions of the party constitution.

Year (session)	Democracy	New Democracy	Socialist democracy / New Democracy	Peoples' Democracy	Intra-party democracy	Centralism	Solidarity	Discipline	Class	Revolution
1921 (1)	0	0/0	0	0	0	0	0	0	8	2
1922 (2)	0	0/0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	0
1923 (3)	0	0/0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	0
1925 (4)	0	0/0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	0
1927 (5)	2	0/0	0	0	0	2	0	3	0	0
1928 (6)	2	0/0	0	0	0	2	0	4	2	4
1942 (7)	20	0/4	0	5	8	3	7	11	33	
1956 (8)	18	0/0	0	1	12	10	13	8	7	
1969 (9)	4	0/1	0	0	2	3	5	25	17	
1973 (10)	4	0/1	0	0	2	4	5	24	17	
1977 (11)	10	0/1	0	2	7	12	15	40	24	
1982 (12)	16	1/2	3	1	7	7	10	17	8	
1987 (13)	17	1/2	3	1	8	11	58	17	12	
1992 (14)	45	1/2	3	1	26	16	77	7	9	
1997 (15)	25	1/2	3	1	14	12	61	5	13	
2002 (16)	25	2/2	3	1	14	13	65	6	7	
2007 (17)	30	2/2	3	1	14	17	63	6	7	
2012 (18)	30	2/2	4	1	14	16	62	6	7	

Table 1. The Frequency of Keywords in the Party Constitution of the NPC²⁹

29 Statistical calculation by the author. Source: “Zhongguo gongchandang lici dangzhang de zhiding ji xiuzheng jiankuang” 中国共产党历次党章的制定及修正简况 [Xinhua wang 新华网], http://news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/2003-09/27/content_1103387.htm (accessed January 15, 2013).

All the keywords of these three categories were mentioned only at a very low level of frequency during the founding years until the 6th NPC. The development from the 7th to the 8th NPC shows that democracy became much more strengthened as centralism, while revolutionary discourse tended to be undermined. Conversely, the party constitutions of the following years up to the end of the 1970s were characterized by a significant marginalization of both democracy keywords and centralism keywords, while revolutionary keywords became dominant again. From the 12th NPC on, revolutionary discourse declined. At the same time, democratic centralism experienced another period of a high degree of institutionalization in which democracy keywords won the dominant position.

This process of democratic centralism switching between the democratic pole and the centralistic pole can be illustrated through Figure 1. The three turning points are the 7th (1942), 8th (1956) and 12th NPC (1982) respectively, according to which development of the dominant discourse of democratic centralism can be divided into four different phases, as discussed below.

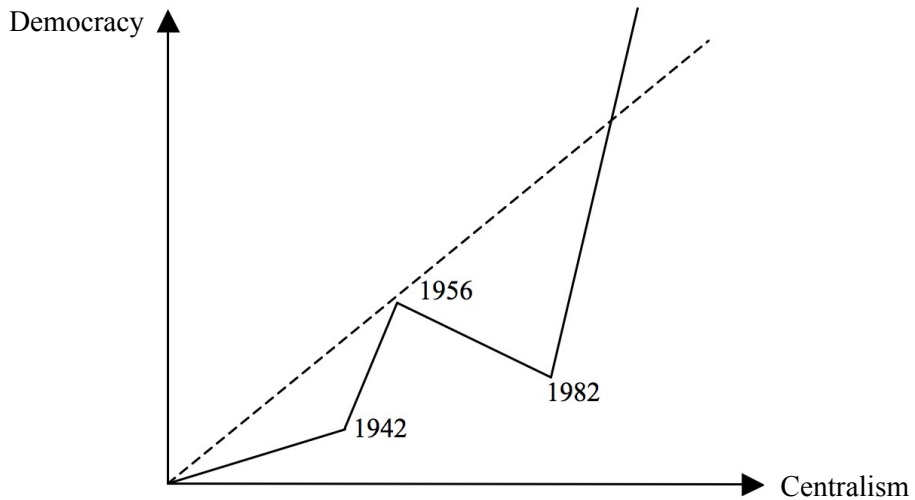


Figure 1. The Change of Democratic Centralism

1921–1942: The Centralistic Discourse

The party constitution of the CPC in the founding years up to the 4th NPC in 1925 was drafted in a very modest form. Most of the centralistic and democratic keywords had not yet entered into its text because the institutionalization

of party organization and systematization of the party program were still at a very low level. Until 1925, the CPC had no more than 1,000 members, which were associated with a very small number of party branches in several provinces (see Table 2).

Year (session)	NPC delegates	Party members
1921 (1)	13	50
1922 (2)	12	195
1923 (3)	30	420
1925 (4)	20	994
1927 (5)	82	57,967
1928 (6)	142	40,000
1945 (7)	755	1,210,000
1956 (8)	1026	10,730,000
1969 (9)	1512	22,000,000
1973 (10)	1249	28,000,000
1977 (11)	1510	35,000,000
1982 (12)	1545	39,650,000
1987 (13)	1936	46,000,000
1992 (14)	1989	51,000,000
1997 (15)	2048	58,000,000
2002 (16)	2114	66,940,000
2007 (17)	2217	72,391,000
2012 (18)	2268	80,269,000

Table 2. *The Development of Party Membership of the CPC*³⁰

30 Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan kexue Zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi lilun yanjiu zhongxin 中国社会科学院科学中国特色社会主义理论研究中心 (Hrsg.): *Jiushi nian lai Zhongguo gongchandang dangyuan shuliang yu jiegou de bianhua yu fazhan* 九十年来中国共产党党员数量与结构的变化与发展, July 5, 2011 in *Guangmingwang* 光明网, http://politics.gmw.cn/2011-07/05/content_2182746.htm (accessed January 15, 2013).

To build a hierarchical Leninist party under the clear guidance of democratic centralism seemed not to be an urgent mission. The term “democracy” was not mentioned at all and the principle of majority was very briefly stipulated for voting on all party resolutions. In contrast, centralistic disciplines won more weight. Lower level party committees were required to absolutely obey resolutions of the central party. The higher level committees had the right to dissolve or reorganize any lower level party committee that rejected this hierarchical order.

With the growing size of party membership and completion of the hierarchical structure of party committees the CPC had to make a set of rules for its centralistic institutionalization. Thus democratic centralism was for the first time written into the party constitution at the 5th NPC in 1927 and systematically regulated at the 6th NPC held in Moscow one year later. Under Soviet influence the CPC defined itself as a sub-branch of the Comintern, which was organized according to the principle of democratic centralism. First, any party committee must be elected by an assembly of representatives of the immediately lower level. Second, every party committee must give regular accounts of its own activities to those party members who elected it. Third, all party resolutions of the higher level party committees up to the Comintern must be unconditionally obeyed and carried out by lower level party committees. These three aspects became the bulk of democratic centralism of the CPC from then on.

1942–1956: The Democratic Discourse

The 7th NPC held in 1942 was a milestone in the institutionalization of democratic centralism toward the democratic pole. This development was associated with the Maoist notion of the “new democratic revolution”, which could only be accomplished by a democratic alliance of all classes supporting the proletariat and its leading party, that is, the CPC.³¹ That revolution would then be followed by a new democratic regime, which would be neither a bourgeois democratic regime like those in European countries nor a proletarian dictatorship like that of the Soviet Union. According to Mao Zedong 毛泽东 (1893–1976), this new democratic regime would only be a joint dictatorship

31 Mao Zedong 毛泽东: “Zhongguo geming he Zhongguo gongchandang” 中国革命和中国共产党, in: *Mao zedong xuanji* 毛泽东选集 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 21991), vol. 2, pp. 647–649.

of all revolutionary classes, which was established through democratic centralism.³² In this framework of a “national united front”, democratic centralism not only played the role of unity of action tolerating free discussion. Rather, it meant more democratic representation by different revolutionary forces within and outside the CPC and the government led by it.³³

As a result, democracy became an important keyword of the party constitution of the 7th NPC. That it was mentioned twenty times demonstrated a sharp turn in CPC discourse to the democratic pole. Most importantly, the fixed expression of intra-party democracy came into the text of the party constitution for the first time. Accordingly, party organs at all different organizational levels were bound by the principle of intra-party democracy. At the level of the party base, the rights of party members, such as freedom of discussion, the right to vote and be voted for, the right to suggest and criticize, were stipulated in detail. At the same time, centralism also remained in the ascendancy. The relationship between democracy and centralism was defined as “centralism on the basis of democracy” (*minzhu jichu shang de jizhong* 民主基础上的集中) and “democracy under the guidance of centralism” (*jizhong zhidao xia de minzhu* 集中指导下的民主). It was explicitly regulated that intra-party democracy should not compromise the centralist principle and the solidarity and unity of the party as a whole. Centralism was incarnated into prescription of the hierarchical subordination of individual members to the collective, minority to majority, lower levels to higher levels, local organizations to the central party. As a result, the frequency of the keyword “discipline” in the party constitution was much higher than that of “democracy”. In addition, a system of “Inspection Committees” was scheduled to be established.

This new development was generally affirmed by the 8th NPC, as the CPC gradually began to adapt its commitment as the governing party of a joint dictatorship of plural classes. The significant signal of this transition to the governance discourse was the dramatic reduction of the frequency of the word “revolution” in the party constitution down to 7 times, about 1/5 of that of the former version. But the democratic discourse did not become stronger. Instead, it reached its peak and began to decrease. The keywords of this category did not appear as frequently as in 1942. In particular, the word “intra-party democracy” was mentioned only once. However, some complementary items of the

32 Mao Zedong: “Xin minzhu zhuyi lun” 新民主主义论, in: *Mao zedong xuanji*, vol. 2, p. 677.

33 Ibid.

democratic principle were added. For example, it was required that communication between higher and lower committees must be kept unblocked, and that all committees must be subordinated both to collective leadership and division of labor. In contrast, the centralistic bias was continuously strengthened, as implied by the rising frequency of the centralistic keywords “solidarity” and “discipline”. According to the unprecedented “general principle” (*zonggang* 总纲) of the new party constitution it was not the democratic principle but solidarity and unity that were identified with the “lifeblood of the party” (*dang de shengming* 党的生命). This implied that the interest of the party was superior to that of party members while no organized party-internal factions would be tolerated.

1956–1982: The Anarchistic Discourse

The versions of the party constitution from the 9th to the 11th NPC were characterized by reversal back to revolutionary discourse under the guidelines of Mao’s new theory of the “continuing revolution under the proletarian dictatorship” (*wuchanjieji zhuanzheng xia jixu geming* 无产阶级专政下继续革命).³⁴ The two keywords “revolution” and “class” reached the highest frequency of usage in the whole history of the CPC. In contrast, the discourse of governance was abandoned and democratic centralism became an empty principle with an anarchistic accent. Both centralistic and democratic keywords were marginalized in the party constitution. On the one side, hierarchic centralism was replaced with personal worship of Mao’s supreme leadership. Any other party leaders could, if needed, be sentenced as traitors and spies. On the other side, rank-and-file members obtained the right to bypass party committees in case of controversy and directly appeal to the central committee up to the supreme leader. Any action to suppress criticism from the bottom would be forbidden and sanctioned.

The party constitution of the 11th NPC in 1977 implied a mixture of both path dependence and discourse switch. As Table 1 shows, the revolutionary

34 Although Mao himself never used this term in his published writings or speeches, the editorial of *Red Flag* (*Hongqi* 红旗) on November 16, 1967 entitled “March forward along the Road set up by the October Revolution” (“Yanzhe shiyue shehui zhuyi geming kaipi de daolu qianjin” 沿着十月社会主义革命开辟的道路前进), which was seen as the first systematization of this thought, was published under his review and agreement. See Gong Yuzhi 龚育之: “Guanyu jixu geming de jige wenti” 关于继续革命的几个问题, in: *Jiaoxue yu yanjiu* 教学与研究 6 (1981), S. 19.

discourse reached its peak in the immediate post-Mao period. At the same time, democratic and centralistic discourses began to revive after the CPC became aware of the devastating impact of the Cultural Revolution. Democratic centralism as a whole was again strengthened in the “general principles”, while intra-party democracy was even promoted as one of the essential functions of the base organizations.

1982–1997: The Democratic Discourse

From the 12th NPC on, the political discourse of the party constitution moved gradually toward the democratic pole again. Although the frequency of democratic keywords did not show any significant rise, intra-party democracy won more concrete institutional support. It was explicitly required that all important decisions must be made only after democratic discussion. Any decision made by a slim majority must be checked. Pre-election and multi-candidate elections were introduced for the first time.

In sharp contrast, the revolutionary discourse faded from the core position of the party constitution. Class and revolution have since then only been mentioned in paragraphs justifying the historical legitimacy of the CPC. Concerning the form of governance, the Leninist orthodox “proletarian dictatorship” was replaced by the eclectic term “people’s democratic dictatorship”, which had long ago been advocated by Mao Zedong in 1949 and applied in the first Constitution of the People’s Republic drafted in 1954.

The development of centralistic discourse was much more complicated. Generally, it was revised with much more modest phraseology toward the democratic pole. Personal worship was forbidden and centralism was no more an absolute term, but with conditional constraints. In the version of the party constitution of the 12th NPC in 1982 it was added with an attribute and defined as “high centralism” (*gaodu jizhong* 高度集中) on the basis of democracy, which reflected the determination of the CPC to rectify the devastating anarchism of the Cultural Revolution. At the 14th NPC in 1992, this term was further modified to “correct centralism” (*zhengque jizhong* 正确集中) to prevent extreme uncontrollable centralistic decision-making. The necessity to overcome the deterioration of democratic centralism in both directions also gave rise to the establishment of the Central Commission for Discipline and Inspection (CCDI) at the 12th NPC. The steep rise in frequency of the word “discipline” could by and large be explained by the fact that the working rules of the CCDI were written into the party constitution in the form

of a whole section since the 13th NPC. However, centralistic keywords such as solidarity and discipline mostly served to bind the party together, especially when unity became a critical life-or-death issue for the CPC in time of serious crisis. Obviously, all the centralistic keywords were highlighted at the 14th NPC, which was held shortly after the Tian'anmen Movement in 1989 and the collapse of the communist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

1997–2012: Reintroduction of Intra-party Democracy

Democratic discourse became more dominant than centralistic discourse in the post-Deng period without a political strongman in the CPC. This change cannot be explicitly read from the statistics of the democratic keywords of the party constitution since the 15th NPC, which was held just several months after the death of Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 (1904–1997). But if one takes into account the frequency of the same democracy indicators in each main report given by the incumbent highest party leader at the NPC, this tendency is much more clearly observable. Obviously, the Maoist term “people’s democratic dictatorship” disappeared from the main report of the 16th NPC and yielded to non-revolutionary terminology. “Socialist democracy” and “people’s democracy” became the formal prescription of the democratic system of the People’s Republic. In the recent main report of the 18th NPC held in 2012, the frequency of the term “socialist democracy” was further much lower than that of the 17th NPC, while the more neutral term “people’s democracy” became the most preferable option. This replacement of the system-defining concept could be interpreted as a softening of the classic ideological discourse. In addition, the keyword “democratic institution” (*minzhu zhidu* 民主制度) was reactivated and accentuated six times, which implied that the CPC attached increasing importance to the democratic institutionalization of the socialist party state.

Accordingly, there was also a switch to democratic discourse with regard to organizational life, which gave rise to a revival of the old concept of “intra-party democracy”. At the 16th NPC, General Secretary Jiang Zemin 江泽民 (born 1926) defined intra-party democracy instead of party unity as the “lifeline of the Party”. Intra-party democracy should play an important exemplary and leading role in realizing people’s democracy. Five years later, in 2007, the report made by Jiang’s successor Hu Jintao 胡锦涛 (born 1942) for the 17th NPC stressed that intra-party democracy should be a guarantee for improving the Party’s creativity and reinforcing its solidarity and unity. In association

with Hu's key concept of the "harmonious society" (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会), intra-party democracy was defined as a vital step in extending democratic participation toward a people's democracy. In other words, increasing intra-party harmony would contribute to promoting social harmony. Finally, intra-party democracy became the central agenda of the 4th Plenary Session of the 17th Central Committee in 2009. According to the communiqué published thereafter, a people's democracy should be realized through intra-party democracy. Five main reform areas were blueprinted: more competitive inner-party elections to choose party officials; a more consensus-based decision-making process called "decision by votes"; more restrictive rules to regulate tenure and transfer, and regional allocation of high-ranking party cadres; a multi-dimensional supervision system to restrain official corruption and other forms of power abuse; new emphasis on the transparency of party affairs.

Year (session)	Democracy	New Democracy / Socialist democracy	People's democracy	Intra-party democracy	Democratic institution	Revolution
1945 (7)	221	0/43	1	0	2	60
1956 (8)	76	0 / 2	21	3	2	71
1969 (9)	7	0/4	0	0	0	221
1973 (10)	1	0/1	0	0	0	59
1977 (11)	61	0/2	3	3	0	214
1982 (12)	5	2/0	0	0	0	26
1987 (13)	48	17/0	4	2	0	22
1992 (14)	38	6/2	5	2	0	24
1997 (15)	55	10/3	5	1	1	18
2002 (16)	54	13/2	4	2	2	7
2007 (17)	69	14/1	4	5	1	8

Year (session)	Democracy	New Democracy / Socialist democracy /	People's democracy	Intra-party democracy	Democratic institution	Revolution
2012 (18)	68	5/1	7	6	6	10

Table 3. *The Democracy Keywords of the Main Report of the NPC* ³⁵

The rise of intra-party democracy in the main report of the NPC gave rise to some concrete revisions of the party constitution with regard to party building. The constitution of the 16th NPC added the requirement of individual consultation and decision making by committees as principles to resolve important problems. From the 17th NPC, the rights of individual party members were stipulated in detail with a commitment to protection from sanctions. The transparency of party-internal affairs and a system of inspection are executed by delegates from the central party. Featured among the newest amendments in the party constitution of the 18th NPC was empowerment of the representatives of party congresses, who had otherwise assembled only once every five years. However, as we have always seen, these revisions mean rather the relative strengthening of democratic discourse than the weakening of centralistic discourse. For example, the higher party committees should be responsible for supervising party congress elections at the lower level.

In summary, the official guidelines of the CPC on democratic centralism have moved from the centralistic pole toward the democratic pole, as Figure 1 illustrates. The shift from a revolutionary discourse to a governance discourse gave rise to a renaissance of the old concept of intra-party democracy in the framework of democratic centralism. However, there were periodic reversals back to a centralistic bias in the name of solidarity and discipline. The balance of democracy and centralism never led to the decline of centralism, which is still the unchallengeable principle of party organization and remains in the ascendant.

35 “Zhongguo gongchandang lici quanguo daibiao dahui shujuku” 中国共产党历次全国代表大会数据库, in *Zhongguo gongchandang xinwenwang* 中国共产党新闻网, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/64168/index.html> (accessed October 8, 2012).

The Perspective of Intra-Party Democratization

Let us now consider the questions raised at the beginning of this paper with regard to developing a model of intra-party democracy within the CPC. I argue that answers to these questions depend on the study of continuity and change of democratic centralism, the inherent tension of which characterizes the CPC's fundamental understanding of democracy.

First, the reintroduction of intra-party democracy cannot be simply depreciated as camouflaging resistance by a centralistic dictatorial party to a general democratization of the political system. Rather, it serves to interpret the discourse transition of democratic centralism toward the democratic pole and prescribes the framework for future political reform in China in the short run. On the other hand, the continuing dualistic character of democratic centralism implies that any successful reform project of intra-party democracy cannot endanger the centralistic authority. Democracy in democratic centralism refers mainly to consultation rather than participation in decision-making, while centralistic discourse rejects any costly democratic voting procedures. Decisions made through votes at lower levels could always be altered or evaded by party leaders at higher levels in the name of solidarity and efficacy. Still, article 15 of the current party constitution revised at the 18th NPC keeps the classic stipulation that "only the Central Committee of the Party has the power to make decisions on major policies of a nationwide character. Party organizations of various departments and localities may make suggestions with regard to such policies to the Central Committee, but shall not make any decisions or publicize their views outside the Party without authorization."³⁶ Accordingly, higher party organizations have the final say in disregarding appeals from lower organizations in case of controversy, while the latter must carry out decisions from levels above and refrain from publicly voicing their differences. In reality, the rights of free expression of lower organizations in the party hierarchy and the right of individual party members in the organizations that they belong to are subordinated to the actual disciplinary structure that is still in the hands of the cadre bureaucracy. Therefore, as long as democratic centralism is taken as the organizational precondition for political reform within the CPC, it is of vital importance to ensure that centralism has no priority over democracy in the case of collision

36 "Zhongguo gongchandang licl dangzhang de zhiding ji xiuzheng jiankuang".

between these two principles. Otherwise, reversal back to dominance of the centralistic bias could recur. Theoretically, democratic centralism could be replaced with intra-party democracy as the highest organizational principle. That radical change of discourse would probably enrich theoretical support for institutionalization of intra-party democracy. But it seems that the CPC will not choose this risky option by abandoning its traditional guidelines. On the contrary, centralistic discourse remains in the ascendant to maintain the party's political survival and dominance, as the new development described in the last section shows.

Second, advocating intra-party democracy implies that the CPC is trying to pursue an experimental-style model distinguished both from the revisionist and Leninist models to overcome the classic dilemma of socialism and democracy left unresolved by Marx and Engels. In the current official formulation of the CPC, intra-party democracy is the means and people's democracy the end. Strengthening people's democracy is to identify democracy instead of dictatorship as the highest principle of political life. On the other hand, strengthening intra-party democracy fills the gap between the general commitment of the CPC to democracy and the reality of exclusive one-party rule in political affairs. One of the most important advocates of intra-party democracy in the CPC think-tank suggests a more systematic theory constructing this staged model of democratization. Chinese democratic reform, according to him, is a process of "incremental democratization" (*zengliang minzhu* 增量民主), which takes its starting point from democratization within the CPC.³⁷

Intra-party democracy and people's democracy are, however, concerned with two completely different scopes of inclusiveness. The former aims at participation by party members, while the latter aims at participation by citizens. Different structures of opportunity should be available: Intra-party democracy does not need any legalistic arrangement, whilst legalization is necessary for any democratic practice at the level of state politics. The incremental extension of democratization from party-internal affairs to state affairs and to the whole of political society has to deal with the tension between party and state. However, advocating intra-party democracy in recent years implies that the CPC has withdrawn from the notion of "separation of party and administration" (*dangzheng fenkai* 党政分开), which was the central

37 Yu Keping 俞可平: *Sixiang jiefang yu zhengzhi jinbu* 思想解放与政治进步 (Beijing: Social Science Academic Press, 2008), p. 23.

part of the political reform project in the 1980s. Instead, today's *status quo* of Chinese politics is no more the differentiation between these two levels of inclusiveness, but in practice the dominance of party over government as a precondition for future political development. Therefore, the incremental model would be logically untenable unless any kind of party law regulating party-internal affairs and the party's involvement in state affairs should come into being. In addition, a much more precarious issue is under what conditions and to what extent can participating subjects be extended from party members to citizens? After the transitional phase of intra-party democracy, democratic interest representation is introduced beyond the CPC as soon as democracy proves workable within the party. Taking people's democracy as the ultimate objective, extension should not be imposed unless the way to it is perfectly "paved". Yet, the experimental-style reform model lacks comprehensive criteria to measure the efficacy of intra-party democratic reform and to define the appropriate timing of transition. In particular, it is worth considering what to do with intra-party democratization if it should fail to prove efficient in some experimental fields, at least in the short run. It may partly succeed in facilitating reproduction of social interest constellations in the party-internal structure. But this could lead to the false conclusion that a people's democracy has already been accomplished, and that the differentiation between intra-party democratic reform and a legally formal commitment to party-external civil participation in political affairs would seem to be unnecessary.

Third, the perspective of intra-party democratization of the CPC depends on its capability to deal with the conceptual ambiguity of democracy. There has been a quite long list of democracy-related terminology to identify throughout the 90-year history of the CPC. Most of these terms were concepts of the regime, in which democracy played the role of an attribute of a substantive, and were associated either with Marxist, Leninist or Revisionist appeals. Gradually, some terms representing a revolutionary bias such as "new democratic revolution" and "people's democratic dictatorship" stepped out of the mainstream of official discourse. At the same time, democracy tended to be promoted as an independent category, which in recent years gave rise to a reinterpretation of socialist democracy, people's democracy, and intra-party democracy. To a certain extent, the continuing diversification of democracy-related terminology facilitates the revision, reinterpretation and revival of democracy at the theoretical level. At the same time, the CPC does not have to break its ideological ties with established dogmas at an institutional cost too

high for it to afford. Nevertheless, change in this direction relies more on the will and performance of leading institutional and individual actors rather than on the categorical imperative of democracy itself. The ambiguity of defining democracy will thus be disadvantageous for sustainable democratic reform of the CPC in the long run. As the foregoing discussion indicates, democracy at different levels must be distinguished. Besides, the fundamental meaning and content of democracy must reach a consensus that is explicit enough to protect itself from arbitrary interpretation and distortion. Otherwise, it would be difficult to set measurable criteria for operable democratic reform projects to resolve the problems of the time and the pace of incremental democratization.

Last but not least, it must be pointed out that rejecting the formal term of “Western democracy” does not mean the CPC holds a totally incommensurable understanding of democracy compared to the parties in the industrialized democracies. A good many scholars argue that Chinese leaders and party scholars on the one side and western scholars on the other talk past one another as they have different understandings of democracy in mind. This kind of assertion is based upon the observation of official insistence by the CPC on socialist democracy being superior to capitalist democracy. However, the antidemocratic antagonism of the CPC is more the result of China’s sticking to its sovereignty in home affairs while facing external pressure for systematic democratization. But in advocating intra-party democracy, the CPC actually no longer shows Leninist resistance to democratic values and indicators as before. For instance, if we consider the five key reform areas of promoting intra-party democracy that are generalized according to the communiqué of the 4th Plenary Session of the 17th NPC, the main democratic elements of contestation and participation stipulated by Robert Dahl are to a certain extent covered in this program.³⁸ The only difference may lie in that the CPC accentuates the significant role of consultation.³⁹ In addition, taking into account factional appeals beneath the party as a whole will reveal that the CPC is characterized by different factional or sectional factors which make uniform cognition, strategy and action by a huge party with regard to democracy in a changing world difficult to achieve. Now a few party leaders or subgroups are in favor of democracy as a universal value out of normative confidence or strategic

38 Robert Dahl: *Polyarchy. Participation and Opposition* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1971), p. 3.

39 Baogang He, Mark E. Warren: “Authoritarian Deliberation: The Deliberative Turn in Chinese Political Development”, in: *Perspectives on Politics*, 9.2 (2011), pp. 269–289.

calculation.⁴⁰ They could appropriate the Marxist orthodox commitment of the CPC to democracy and reinterpret it in a revisionist meaning to facilitate intra-party democratization in spite of inbuilt centralistic bias and the nationalistic propaganda of “anti-westernization” in the official discourse of democratic centralism.

Conclusion

The political discourse of the CPC on the relationship between socialism and democracy has changed over time. In particular, democratic centralism in the formulation of the party constitution is moving from a centralistic pole toward a democratic pole but with periodical reversal back to centralism in the process of transition of the CPC from a revolutionary party to an adaptive governing party. This transition has given rise to reintroduction of the old concept of intra-party democracy. Yet intra-party democratization is still structurally constrained by the centralistic principle and to some extent in contradiction with the idea of democratizing the whole political system because of its problems of conceptual ambiguity and lack of operability. However, it does at least set out a framework for China’s future political reform in the short run.

40 Cheng Li: “*Intra-Party Democracy in China: Should We Take It Seriously?*” [Brookings Institute], <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2009/11/fall-china-democracy-li> (accessed July 7, 2012).

