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The Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC): Its Role and its Future

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Background Brief: The Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC): Its Role and Its Future

Executive Summary

As its name indicates, the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) is a consultative assembly aimed at giving status, a platform and the illusion of influence to the non-administrative elites of the country. The CPPCC includes a National Committee and local committees down to the county level. Their members are not elected but hand-picked by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). While around 60% of its 2,237 members do not belong to the CCP, the National Committee is chaired by Jia Qinglin, number four in the CCP top leadership, and operated on a daily basis by the director of the CCP United Front Department, currently Du Qinglin. The CPPCC is therefore an institution whose objective is to both consult scientific, cultural, artistic and now more and more entrepreneurial elites and keep them as faithful to the CCP rule as possible. Although every year CPPCC members make thousands of proposals to the governments, their impact is minimal. While some CPPCC members take advantage of the softer political environment to air candid criticisms about specific policies or decisions, to-date none of them has challenged the system. The CPPCC’s activities are likely to keep expanding both within China and overseas. But its political influence will probably remain marginal, and its role will continue to mainly legitimize the CCP domination.

Historical Background

The Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) was created by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) on the eve of the foundation of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) (30 September 1949). Echoing the failed Political Consultative Conference set up by the Nationalist Kuomintang in 1946 to prevent the resumption of the civil war, the new CPPCC (180 members) was designed both as a symbol of the “new democracy” then promoted by Mao Zedong, a more inclusive and accommodating political system supposed to be distinct both from capitalism and socialism, and an instrument of united front, the well-known strategy developed by all communist parties in order to win over and put into submission the non-communist elites.

Then chaired by Mao himself, it included prestigious figures as Mme Sun Yat-sen (Song Qinglin), the writer Guo Moruo and the Dalai Lama (until he fled China in 1959). Fourteen “democratic parties”, small political forces which had split with the Kuomintang, were represented in it. Elected for five years, the CPPCC drafted an apparently moderate “Common Programme” which was regarded as the PRC’s first de facto state constitution and acted as New China’s parliament until the establishment of the National People’s Congress (NPC) in 1954. Gradually, local CPPCC were set up down to the county level.

Chaired after 1954 by then Premier Zhou Enlai, the CPPCC (559 members) continued to
operate and to expand (1,199 members in 1964) until the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution (1966) but its role had already become weaker after the anti-rightist movement in 1957 and the dismissal or arrest of numerous non-CCP figures who dared to speak up during the Hundred Flowers Movement, a short-lived attempt by Mao to give more of a voice to the intelligentsia and society in the aftermath of the 1956 Hungarian and Polish uprisings.

The CPPCC system was resurrected in March 1978, one and a half years after Mao’s death. Freshly rehabilitated, Deng Xiaoping chaired its National Committee (5th since 1949, 1,988 members) and used this institution as an avenue to rehabilitate many leading cadres who had been persecuted by Mao. In 1983, Deng Yingchao, Zhou’s widow, took over the CPPCC (6th, 2,039 members) until 1988; she was succeeded by Li Xiannian, a semi-retired leader close to Zhou and who had survived the whole Maoist era (7th).

In 1993, as the revolutionary generation of CCP leaders were leaving the stage, the political status of the CPPCCs was stabilized. Since then, its National Committee Chair has been the number four in the CCP Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC, behind the PRC president, the NPC chair and the Prime Minister): Li Ruihuan, one of the few reformists that survived after Tiananmen, from 1993 to 2003 (8th & 9th CPPCC) and Jia Qinglin, a Fujian Party secretary close to Jiang Zemin, since then (10th & 11th CPPCC). As other top state leaders, the CPPCC chair is now supposed to serve two terms and retire. As a consequence, the CCP top leadership co-opted at the 16th Party Congress in October 2002 and elected to the corresponding state jobs in March 2003 is to step down from the PBSC in autumn 2012 and from their state job in March 2013. Among possible candidates to the 12th CPPCC chair, Mme State Councilor Liu Yandong, a former United Front Department director and secretary general of the CPPCC, is the most often mentioned name. She would be to date, the first woman ever to enter the PBSC.

The CPPCC: An Ambiguous Constitutional Status

The CPPCC was not mentioned in the 1954, 1975 and 1978 PRC state constitutions. It is only referred to in the Preamble of the current 1982 constitution in the following paragraph:

“In the long years of revolution and construction, there has been formed under the leadership of the Communist Party of China a broad patriotic united front that is composed of democratic parties and people’s organizations and embraces all socialist working people, all patriots who support socialism and all patriots who stand for reunification of the motherland. This united front will continue to be consolidated and developed. The Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference is a broadly representative organization of the united front, which has played a significant historical role and will continue to do so in the political and social life of the country, in promoting friendship with the people of other countries and in the struggle for socialist modernization and for the reunification and unity of the country.”
And in 1993, the following sentence was added to the preamble:

“Under the leadership of the communist Party of China, multi-party cooperation and the political consultative system will continue to exist and develop for a long time to come”

These political statements make very clear the mission, the role and the composition of the CPPCC. On the one hand, the CPPCC is aimed at representing all the “patriotic” forces (as the democratic parties) and individuals, in other words the non-communist and non-administrative elites (e.g. who are not (any more) CCP or government cadres) which accept the leading role of the CCP and endorse its reunification strategy with Taiwan (and then with Hong Kong and Macau). On the other hand, the CPPCC is a major instrument of the CCP’s united front work: winning over ever changing elites and forces, both within China but also overseas. And the 1993 amendment has been added as a sign of prudent political overture, four years after Tiananmen, in order to emphasize and guarantee the perpetuation of this institutional arrangement.

However, the CPPCC status is not legally defined in the constitution and in no way can it be compared to a “upper house” or a senate. The PRC has a unicameral legislature, the NPC and although the CPPCC has established relations with other countries second chambers (for instance, the French Senate or the British House of Lords), its role, its organisation and its membership remain very different. As Renminwang (People’s Daily Online) stated in 2006: “The basic principle of the cooperation between the CPC and the other parties is long-term coexistence, mutual supervision, sincere treatment with each other and the sharing of weal and woe”.

**CPPCC Organisation**

The CPPCC is an institution comprising a National Committee (today 2,237 members) and 3,118 local committees (totalling 632,000 members) at the provincial, municipal (or prefectural), and country levels. All of them are now appointed for a renewable term of five years. The National Committee’s plenary session is held in Beijing every year in March and lasts one week to ten days. As the NPC, it delegates most of its competences to a large Standing Committee (SC) (298 members) that meets every two months. SC members run the CPPCC’s nine special committees (among them economic affairs, population, resources and environment, education, liaison with Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan and overseas Chinese, and foreign affairs). The National Committee has also set up in the last fifteen years three “national mass organisations”: the China Committee on Religion and Peace created in 1994 and whose international role is growing; set up in 2011, the China Economic and Social Council is engaged in “research and counseling and service for the promotion of coordinated economic and social development and the promotion of a harmonious society”; and established in 2006, the China Institute of the Theory of the CPPCC, an “academic organisation” is “engaged in research and publicity concerning the system of multiparty cooperation and political consultation led by the CCP”, in other words in propagating the
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Chinese model of “socialist democracy”.

The number of “groups” officially represented in the CPPCC has gradually increased, up to 34 groups today. Among them, are the CCP and the eight “democratic parties” reorganised at the end of the 1950s and reactivated in 1978 (see Appendix below), but also several mass organisations as the Communist Youth League, the Federation of Trade Union and the Women’s Federation, and quite a few professionals regrouped in “circles” (agriculture, sports, press and publications, etc).

Chaired by the CCP’s fourth highest ranking member, the CPPCC National Committee leadership is formally constituted of a large variety of non-communist, ethnic (non-Han) and religious figures (about half of the 26 vice-chairpersons and 65% of the Standing Committee members). However, its key leader is the director of the CCP United Front Department, today Du Qinglin, who runs the day-to-day operation of this assembly, with the assistance of secretary general Qian Yunlu, an other CCP Central Committee member.

The local CPPCC committees replicate this organisational model.

Membership

Officially, CPPCC members are supposed to be “personnages who represent all areas and sectors of the Chinese society, have social influence and are capable of participating in the deliberation and administration of states affairs”. As a tradition, CCP members have always constituted a minority in the CPPCCs, representing usually one third of the delegates. In the 11th CPPCC National Committee (2008-2013), they amount to 895 (40%) in comparison the non-communist are 1,342 (60%). There are 393 women, accounting for 18%. All of China’s 56 ethnic groups are represented: as a result minorities are over-represented. Leaders of the major authorised religious groups (65 members), the 8 “democratic parties” (380), members of the intelligentsia (scientists, professors, doctors, writers, artists) as well as “compatriots” from Hong Kong (126), Macau (29) and even Taiwan (15) sit in this august assembly.

In the last fifteen years, more and more celebrities (e. g. movie director Zhang Yimou, hurdler Liu Xiang) and wealthy entrepreneurs have been co-opted to what is often described as a “riches’ club” (furen julebu). In 2011, 20 of the top Chinese executives which companies are listed on the Shanghai and Shenzhen Stock Exchanges were CPPCC delegates (63 were NPC members), including Yang Chai, president of China Life Insurance, Ma Mingzhe, chairman of Ping An Insurance and Li Shaohe, president of China Shipping Groups. While state-owned enterprises managers remain better represented, private entrepreneurs have become more numerous: 71 of China’s 1,000 richest persons, including Li Shufu, president of Zhengjiang Geely Automobile Company, sit in the 11th CPPCC (75 are NPC delegates) side by side with the usual Hong Kong and Macau pro-Beijing tycoons. Lately, foreign companies’ top representatives have also joined this “temple of celebrities” (mingren tang), as China chief executive of JPMorgan Fang Fang. Nevertheless, more
traditional elites, as neo-marxist Chen Kuiyuan, president of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and a fierce critic of bourgeois liberalisation, remain well-entrenched in this institution (he is CPPCC vice-chairman). And many former and retired CCP and government leading cadres still still in the national and local CPPCCs. The same trends can be observed in the local CPPCCs. Moreover, CPPCC membership partly overlap since leaders of local CPPCCs also belong to the CPPCC of the immediate higher level.

CPPCC members are not elected: officially, “they are selected through consultation and recommendation” by the Standing Committee of the CPPCC of the same level and approved by the Chair’s Council (chair and vice-chairs) of the preceding CPPCC. In reality, they are recommended by the CCP united front departments and appointed by the Communit Party Committee of the same level. It is hard for a “candidate” to refuse such an offer and usually, he or she accepts with the expectation to enlarge his or her network of useful connections. Clearly CPPCC membership is perceived as a status symbol and also, for the CCP, an efficient method to better integrate the new elites. Before he was taken into custody in April 2011, artist Ai Weiwei had been twice offered a CPPCC membership but it is not known whether he accepted or not. Finally, in the last decade more CPPCC members have been expelled for corruption, other due to a lack of attendance or the adoption of an other citizenship as actress Gong Li, a member of the 9th and the 10th CPPCC. For instance, between 2003 and 2007, at least seven influential CPPCC National Committee members were expelled and later arrested for graft, including Qiu Xiaohua, former head of the National Bureau of Statistics, Zheng Xiaoyu, former director of the State Food and Drug Administration, ex-vice governors of Sichuan and Henan provinces Li Dachang and Li Debin, former chairwoman of the Heilongjiang CPPCC Han Guizhi and former chairman of the Industry and Commerce Federation of Ningxia Li Pinsan. More recently, in 2010, Huang Yao, also Guizhou CPPCC chair, and Zhang Chunjiang, former deputy general manager of China Mobile were stripped of their CPPCC membership. At the local level, corruption seems to be even more widespread, leading to the fall of Sun Shuyi, Shandong CPPCC chair (see below), and Chen Shaoqi, Guangdong CPPCC chair in 2009 and of Song Chenguang, Jiangxi CPPCC vice-chairman in 2011. One of the key drivers of this surge of corruption cases has been the increasing recruitment of and proximity with business people in the CPPCCs.

In any case, although they are required to “maintain close ties with the people and get acquainted with and report the peoples’ desires and demands”, CPPCC are good representatives of the traditional and new official elites of the PRC.

**Competences**

CPPCCs do not have any legislative powers: they enjoy three main functions: consultation,
supervision and participation.

- The CPPCCs are consulted before political decisions are made. For instance, at the March 2011 session, the CPPCC National Committee plenary session deliberated on the 12th Five-Year Programme and made some recommendations.

- Supervision is usually carried out by groups of CPPCC members who make suggestions and criticism concerning the work of specific government departments. They can also report and expose violations of discipline or laws.

- Participation refers to conducting investigations and studies, reporting on social conditions and popular sentiments and drafting proposals (ti’an). Proposals need to be approved by the CPPCC’s Committee for Handling Proposals established in 1991. Every year, the CPPCC National Committee submits a few thousand proposals to the government, the party of the NPC. Between 2003 and 2008, the CPPCC handled 23,000 proposals and since then around 6,000 proposals every year. Government departments are required to address these proposals. Usually, over 90% of the national CPPCC proposals are claimed to be satisfactorily handled. However, in September 2011 Mao Likun, vice-chair of CPPCC Committee for Handling Proposals, complained that only around 1,000 of the 6,000 proposals approved every year by the CPPCC could actually be carried out by the government’s departments.

As a matter of fact, not every CPPCC member’s initiative is welcomed. For example, at the 2008 annual session, Sun Shuyi, who was then also chairman of Shandong’s CPPCC (see above), and a number of other Shandong delegates proposed that the government allocate funds to finance the construction of a large “Chinese Cultural Symbolic City” near Qufu, Confucius hometown. The high cost of the project (US$4.2 billion) and its self-serving nature triggered a countermotion signed by 100 other delegates, including Mao’s grandson Mao Xinyu. As a result, the proposal was turned down.

The CPPCC activities contribute also to giving publicity to the activities of the “democratic parties”, who gather all-weather fellow travelers of the Communist Party. For instance, between 1990 and 2006, these groupings submitted more than 2,400 proposals on a large variety of subjects (anti-secession law, taxation reform in rural areas, social stability, etc.). However, this represents a small portion of the CPPCC proposals.

Finally, the main added-value of the CPPCC, in particular at the national level, has been the political stage it offers to the non-bureaucratic elites of the country. It allows them to air their view in a more candid manner than governmental officials, and perhaps also NPC delegates. The political environment of the day has an impact of the degree of openness and pluralism that comes out from the CPPCC. In the last ten years, the renewed blood among members has contributed to turning the CPPCC(s) into a platform for daring criticism and a tribune, a loudspeaker for China’s current problems and social tensions. To the point that some CPPCC members tend to improvise non-professional and even irresponsible comments that reflect more their privileges or class-bias than a real comprehension of the political issues at stake. But, all in all, most CPPCC members’ comments or proposals are
politically-correct and, instead of pushing for a genuine political reform, contribute to legitimizing the current CCP-led political system.

CPPCC membership is not a full time job, except for the chair’s council members. Most members are busy one week a year with this institution and sometimes do not even care to show up at the plenary session (especially at the local level). Standing Committee members are more involved (around six weeks a year) but tend to concentrate on tourism-oriented study tours within and outside of China.

The National Committee of the CPPCC has developed international relations with many countries and upper houses and participates in China’s diplomatic activism on the international stage. Between 2003 and 2008, Chair’s Council members visited 70 countries and received 46 foreign delegations. Its leaders are used to propagate a more pluralistic and open-minded image of China. In other words, the CPPCC’s international activities are aimed at enhancing China’s soft power.

**Conclusion**

Often presented as one of the “four leading teams” of Chinese governance, with the Party, the government and the NPC, the CPPCC is the weakest and probably the most marginal of them. True, the CPPCCs are supposed to provide advice and supervision to China’s political leadership. And they help the latter better communicating with and winning over the country’s non-administrative elites. But the CPPCCs elitist membership and lack of democratic legitimacy do not really contribute to a more harmonious CCP-state – society relationship. CPPCC members are not responsible before voters and, on the contrary, seem mainly interested in their new proximity to power and the opportunities this offer to expand their business and bureaucratic connections. Moreover, their proposals are rarely translated into policies.

Some criticism has been expressed along those lines in China and some have even called for an abolition of the CPPCCs. However, it remains a minority view, or at least an opinion that has few chances to percolate to the upper strata of the CCP system, unless the leadership elected at the 18th Party congress in the autumn 2012 decides to embark into a meaningful political reform process. Neither the likely next CCP secretary general Xi Jinping nor the future Premier Li Keqiang have given any indication that they would move into that direction. As a consequence, it is fair to conclude that in the next five years, the CPPCC will stick to its role and probably try to diversify its membership further and better check the government’s activities.

Its changing membership and the promotion of a growing number of managers and *nouveaux riches* may contribute to enhancing the CPPCCs’ influence, especially at the local levels. However, the past two decades have proven that China’s entrepreneurs are usually politically legitimist, provided that their business interests are not threatened. The ultimate question is whether China’s non-elites will continue to observe silently the CPPCC’s annual
political theatre or whether they will express increasing direct opposition to it and more generally the PRC’s formal and legitimizing but undemocratic institutions.

The implications for the European Union are not easy to identify. The author would recommend caution to all member states and particularly their upper house before embarking into “friendly” exchanges and relationship with China’s CPPCC. The establishment of any long-term relationship, let alone agreement between the European Parliament or EU member-states’ legislative representations and the CPPCC risk to participate in the legitimization of this non-democratic and rather questionable institution. The EU authorities and member-states should remember that, as the NPC, the CPPCC is a CCP-appointed corporatist and elitist representation of the Chinese society, à la Mussolini or à la Pétain, that put the professional organizations above the citizenship, and the celebrities and rich above the ‘have nots’. It would be advisable, therefore, for the EU to keep its distance from this institution. At the same time, for EU diplomats or experts, meeting CPPCC members may ease their way to connecting the pro-CCP on-administrative old and new elites as well as contribute to improving their information and their understanding about China’s domestic problems, in terms of economic development, social tensions and future political reforms. However, such encounters should remain low-key and receive as little publicity as possible since in a democratic China there would be no space for such an institution.
Appendix

China’s Eight “Democratic Parties”

The total membership of the “democratic parties” (*minzhu dang*) was estimated in 2011 around 710,000, against 290,000 in 1988 and 80,000 in 1978 when they were reactivated. Their membership has increased regularly in the last twenty years but the CCP (80 million members) makes sure that they do not become too large. Their finances are controlled by the CCP as well.

Here is the list, date of establishment, sector of the society represented, estimated membership and current leader of the eight “democratic parties”:

1) Kuomintang’s Revolutionary Committee (1948)
Ex-Kuomintang, people in relations with Taiwan, dedicated to the unification of the motherland
81,000 in 2007 (42,000 in 1992)
Chairwoman: Ms. He Luli

2) Democratic League of China (1941)
Middle-level and senior intellectuals in the fields of culture, education, science and technology
181,000 in 2007 (100,000 in 1993)
Chairman: Jiang Shusheng

3) Chinese Democratic Association for National Construction (1945)
Representative figures in the economic field (entrepreneurs, managers and engineers
108,000 in 2007 (40,000 in 1988)
Chairman: Cheng Siwei

4) Chinese Association for the Promotion of Democracy (1945)
Representative intellectuals in the fields of education, culture, publishing and science
103,000 in 2007 (24,000 in 1988)
Chairman: Xu Jialu

5) Peasant and Workers Democratic Party (1930)
Intellectuals of the medical and health sectors
99,000 (43,000 in 1988)
Chairman: Jiang Zhenghua

6) Justice Party (Zhigongdang 致公黨, 1925)
Middle and upper levels of returned overseas Chinese and their relatives
28,000 (15,000 in 1993)
Chairman: Luo Haocai

7) 3 September Society 九九九 (1944)
Representative middle and senior level intellectuals in the fields of science, technology, higher education and medicine
105,000 (11,000 in 1983)
Chairman: Han Qide

8) Taiwan Democratic Autonomous League 台獨聯盟 (1947)
Representative and upper level Taiwan compatriots living in large and medium-size cities on the mainland
2,100 (1,300 in 1992)
Chairman: Li Wenyi