

Summary from the Roundtable with Academics in Law and Political Science in Beijing

Time: July 15, 2004 9:15 a.m.-12:00 p.m.

Location: Institute of Political Science, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences

Theme: The Advance of Political Civilization in China

On the afternoon of July 15, 2004 (Thursday), the Canadian delegation attending the Symposium with the NPC Research Office in Beijing met with a small group of local academics in political science and law. (For a complete attendant list, please refer to the appendix). The meeting was organized by the Institute of Political Science of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences at the request of the Parliamentary Centre, and chaired by Prof. Jiang Jinsong from the Institute. Canadian delegates expected to achieve two objectives through the roundtable:

- Study the newly created concept of “political civilization” in China and its implications for the country’s political reform agenda
- Study the context for NPC and congress system within the political reform

Chinese experts invited to the roundtable made presentations or comments on the current trends in China’s political reform from a wide range of perspectives. They also responded to various questions raised by the Canadian delegation in the course of discussion. Through close discussion, a number of underlying concepts emerging recently in China were clarified and a broad picture of the country’s political reform was presented.

Trends of Political Science in China

Mr. Wang Yicheng, Director of the Institute of Political Science, provided a review of the history of the Institute since its establishment in 1985 and the evolution of political science as an independent academic discipline in China. It was noted that national leaders increasingly recognized and supported the contributory role of political science to China’s reform drive. The Institute was claimed by Mr. Wang to be a think tank and research organ serving the Party’s political reform agenda.

In Wang’s comments on the political culture, he referred to Marxism and Deng Xiaoping’s theory as the persistent guiding principles of the Communist Party and the mainstream ideology in China. He highlighted the country’s interest in learning about Western systems, values and theories and emerging concepts related to democratic politics and market economy. But he opposed to replicating Western models without adapting them to China’s context. Mr. Wang also stressed that the development of political civilization in China should keep pace with the evolution of spiritual civilization (moral values) and material civilization (economic well-being).

Democracy and RoL: Two Pillars of Political Civilization

Professor Li Lin shed an insight into the implications of the concept of “political civilization”. To begin with, he noted that the concept emerged in 1980s as part of the Marxist vocabulary but it had not drawn intensive academic interest in China until about two or three years before. Prof. Li confirmed that the country’s top-level leaders had attached great importance to learning about this concept. He provided the example that, in September 2003, President Hu Jintao attended a 3-

hour lecture given by Prof. Li himself and other academics on political civilization and rule of law. Prof. Li identified the four domains covered by the lecture as:

1. Marxist theory of political civilization
2. Main features of political civilization in capitalist societies
3. China's socialist and political system and its construction
4. The development of political civilization in China

Prof. Li expounded upon the concept of political civilization as referred to in the course of the lecture. Improvement on a democratic political system and promotion of rule of law were identified as the two main elements of the concept during the previous lecture. He noted the significant role of the NPC and local People's Congress had been highlighted in both processes. According to him, areas identified as priorities for the NPC included an improved legislative process, strengthened supervision of the NPC and an improved electoral system.

Prof. Li outlined some recommendations arising from the lecture that he thought would mark future priorities in the country's advance to political civilization:

1. Improve democracy and autonomy at the grassroots level
2. Streamline the law for village committees
3. Strengthen the constitution and a law-based system
4. Ensure consistency in the legal system
5. Guarantee effective enforcement of laws
6. Effect coherent reform on all systems incl. the executive, legislative and judicial
7. Strengthen the oversight of state power and the protection of human rights
8. Increase civic education on and public awareness of rule of law, citizenship, duties, etc.

To conclude, Prof. Li alerted Canadian delegates to an ongoing debate among Chinese academics on the improvement of democracy within the CPC. He thought momentum of this cause could have a significant bearing on the entire political reform.

Overview of the Carter Centre's International Symposium in July

Prof. Yang Guangbin began by noting that civic awareness among the public, especially youth, was on a rise, thanks to the country's latest effort to promote citizenship education. According to him, rights of citizens, civic duties and other governance concepts have become more and more popular among the younger generation of Chinese.

Prof. Yang was one of the participants in an international symposium co-organized by the Carter Centre and some Chinese universities on June 11 and 12, 2004 and that focused on a similar theme of "political civilization". He summarized some key issues and findings covered in the meeting as follows.

1. Democratization and Rule of Law. Prof. Yang mentioned that the findings of the symposium in this area focused on
 - constructing rule of law;
 - restructuring the judicial system; and
 - fostering balance of power between different branches of the government
2. Reform the NPC system.

3. Role of Local Congresses in the Process of Democratization. The conclusion at the symposium was that the supervision function was strengthened at the local level but still comparatively weak at the central level.
4. Democratization within the Party.
5. Electoral Reform. Recommendations were raised by representatives from Sichuan and Jiangsu for new electoral reform at county/township level. At the same time, a concern was voiced that in comparison to self-governance at the village level, urban communities lacked interest in and awareness of civic engagement. Prof. Yang noted that the phenomenon had its root in the shorter exposure of urban residents to grassroots elections in relative to the rural residents. He mentioned that another explanation offered was that the interests of rural residents hinged more closely on the decisions of their village committees than urban residents were by the decisions of their community authorities because of the latter's greater mobility.
6. NGOs/CSOs and Governance in China. Prof. Yang told Canadian delegates that the Symposium recognized the upsurge of NGOs in China. It was pointed out that projects of international NGOs for women and children were mostly concentrated in Yunnan and Guizhou while self-organized NGOs started to assume an increasing role in promoting good governance in large urban centres such as Beijing and Shanghai.
7. Theoretical Models for Democratization. The finding of the symposium outlined three different models of democratization for countries in transition, i.e. East Asia, CIS states and Central America.
8. Evaluation of the Chinese Political Reform. A consensus was reached that political reform had made great progress in the past 30 years but changes had taken place rather gradually.

Prof. Yang made a keynote presentation on the institutional cost for political reform. His central argument was that two structural problems in China, i.e. faith in economic reform alone and a highly centralized political system, had made it costly to advance a political reform without making systematic changes.

Canadian delegates asked how academic findings normally fed into the policy-making process in China. Prof. Yang noted that the chance for political scientists in China to inform and influence the policy process is less obvious than scholars with science and technology background. When asked about the role and impacts of NGOs in China, Mr. Yang identified Project Hope as a prominent example of national NGOs working to promote the right of children to education.

The NPC's Coordinative Roles in Political Reform

Professor Jiao Hongchang identified four essential elements in the concept of "political civilization" as:

- Good constitution respecting organizational and individual rights
- Functioning electoral, parliamentary and partisan systems
- Rule of law, particularly the enforcement of the constitution and laws
- Legislative and judicial protection of human rights

Prof. Jiao stressed the importance of ensuring the coordinated management and strengthening of these four elements at the top leadership level. In responding to questions from Canadian participants, Prof. Jiao noted that the NPC was given the leading role and responsibility in coordinating political reform at all levels, mostly through exercising its legislative power. He

confirmed that the NPC had begun to assume a stronger role with a growing number of dedicated deputies joining with solid career background. According to him, the increase in the number of full-time deputies and staff had also decisively strengthened the role of the institution in comparison to the past, when most deputies wore several hats at the same time and therefore could not dedicate meaningfully. Prof. Jiao commented that not enough effort was made to empower the NPC and promote public awareness of its role, which had negative impacts on the participation of citizens.

Professor Jiao put forth a number of complementary theoretical interpretations of the term “political civilization” arising recently in China:

1. Political achievement (changes and improvements in policies)
2. Integration of political elements (i.e. integration of different institutions, underlying values and behaviours in the political system)
3. Process of civilization
4. Socio-political progress theory
5. Extent to which democracy, freedom and equality can be realized (encyclopaedic definition)

In his opinion, political civilization is part of social civilization and should be taken as a historical concept. He noted that views about political civilization would vary across social sectors and ethnic groups and the dynamic of reform itself would be constantly evolving.