## Contents

*About the Editor*  
*Introduction*  
*Abbreviations and Acronyms*  

### Section One  China and the EU: The General Context  
1  
*Chinese Internal Views of the EU*  
*Gudrun Wöcher*  
3  
*The Chinese Five Year Programme (2011–2015)*  
and Europe 2020  
*Roderic Wye*  
12  
*China’s Green Economy and EU–China Cooperation*  
*Jørgen Delman and Ole Øgaard*  
23  

### Section Two  Chinese Internal Politics and the EU  
33  
*China: The National People’s Congress*  
*Roderic Wye*  
35  
*The Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC): Its Role and its Future*  
*Jean-Pierre Cabestan*  
51  
*The Role of Chinese Soft Power*  
*Anonymous*  
63  
*The Situation of Lawyers in the PRC*  
*Nicholas Bequelin*  
71  
*Cadre Training and the Party School System in Contemporary China*  
*Frank N Pieke*  
82
Contents

The Role of Think Tanks in China 88
Nicola Casarini

Public Consultations in China 98
Jasper Beeker

Section Three Chinese International Relations 113
An Assessment of EU–China Relations in Global Governance Forums 115
Giovanni B. Andornino

China’s Response to the US ‘Return to Asia’ Tour 128
Andrew Small

BRICS: A Cohesive Grouping? 139
Sylvia Hui

China–Pakistan Relations 148
Gareth Price

The Chinese Reaction to the March 2011 Earthquake and Tsunami and the Nuclear Aftermath 156
Caroline Rose

China–Vietnam Relations on Maritime Borders 165
Marianna Brungs

Patterns of China–Russia Cooperation in Multilateral Forums 175
Neil Munro

Competing Claims in the South China Sea: Assessment and Prospects 183
Philip Andrews-Speed

The Impact of the Arab Revolutions on China’s Foreign Policy 201
Ben Simpfendanner

China and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea 214
Amy Studdart

Reappraising Chinese Engagement in Africa 223
Ian Taylor

China’s Energy Policy Towards Central Asia 232
Bobo Lo

China and Latin America 241
Rhys Jenkins

China’s ‘Non-Policy’ for Afghanistan 251
Bernt Berger

China–Burma Relations 261
Marianna Brungs

China and Southeast Asia 274
David Cameron

The Changing Politics of Nepal 285
Gareth Price

China and Russia’s Competition for East and Southeast Asia Energy Resources 294
Philip Andrews-Speed

Section Four The Chinese Economy 307
The Liberalisation of Chinese Financial Markets 309
Vilem Semerak

Investment Provisions in China’s Free Trade Agreements 327
Christopher M Dent

Bond Issuance by Local Authorities in China 337
Vanessa Rossi

The Role of Shadow Banking in Chinese Business 347
Sandrine Lunven

Family Businesses in China 355
Anonymous

Where does China Stand in the Eurobond Debate? 366
Vanessa Rossi
Innovation in China
Alice Rezkova
373

Chinese Investments into the EU Energy Sector
Hinrich Voss
380

Chinese Overseas Acquisitions: The Nokia Siemens/
Motorola Case
Marc Lap rerouza
390

The Chinese Middle Class
Paul French
397

Tax and Pensions in China
Stuart Leckie and Rita Xiao
406

Waste Management in China
Anonymous
416

Section Five  Chinese Social Issues
429

Social Unrest in China
Jude Howell
431

The Recent Labour Unrest in China and the Politics
of Handling Collective Mobilisation by the Party-State
Eric Florence
441

Urbanisation, Rural-to-Urban Migration and Housing
in China
Betina Grassow
452

Land Acquisition in China
Stephan Wong
465

China's Food Security
Robert Ash
477

Suggested Further Reading
495

Index
499
The Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC): Its Role and its Future
(August 2013)

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Executive Summary

As its name indicates, the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) is a consultative assembly aimed at giving a status, 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 Yu Zhengsheng, number four of the CCP top leadership, and operated on a daily basis by the director of the CCP United Front Department, today Ling Jihua, under the supervision of his predecessor, Du Qinglin, member of the CCP Central Secretariat. Both Du and Ling are CPPCC Vice Chairmen. The CPPCC is therefore an institution whose objective is to both

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6 Ling Jihua was transferred in August 2012 to this position from his directorship of the very powerful CCP Central Committee General Office after his attempt to cover up the death of his son with two young ladies in a sports car accident in Beijing earlier that year.
consult scientific, cultural, artistic and now more and more entrepreneurial elites and keep them as faithful to CCP rule as possible. Although every year CPPCC members make thousands of proposals to the government, their impact is minimal. While some CPPCC members take advantage of the softer political environment to air candid criticism 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 legitimise 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 founding 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 a return to 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 from both capitalism and socialism, and an instrument of united front, the well-known strategy developed by all communist parties in order to win over and subdue non-communist elites.

Then chaired by Mao himself, it included prestigious figures as Mose 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 also represented. 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 CPPCCs were set up down to county level.

Chaired after 1954 by then Premier Zhou Enlai, the CPPCC (559 members) continued to operate and 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 voice to the intelligentsia and the 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 (1976). Freshly rehabilitated, Deng Xiaoping chaired its National Committee (the 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 when 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 was leaving the stage, the political status of the CPPCCs was stabilised. Since then, its National Committee Chair has been the number four of the CCP Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC, behind the PRC president, the NPC chair and the Prime Minister): Li Ruihu, one of the few reformists that survived after Tianannmen, from 1993 to 2003 (8th & 9th CPPCC), Jia Qinglin, a Fujian Party secretary close to Jiang Zemin, from 2003 to 2013 (10th & 11th CPPCC) and Yu Zhengsheng (12th CPPCC), a former Shanghai Party secretary, since then. As other top state leaders, the CPPCC chair is now supposed to serve two terms and retire. However, born in 1945, Yu was nearly 68 when he took over this position. As a result, he should be replaced at the next (19th) Party Congress in autumn 2017 from his position in the PBSC and, in March 2018, from his position of CPPCC Chairman.

**The CPPCC: Ambiguous Constitutional Status**

The CPPCC was not mentioned in the 1954, 1975 or 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.7

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.\(^8\)

These political statements make very clear the mission, role and the composition of the CPPCC. On the one hand, the CPPCC is aimed at representing all of 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. The 1993 amendment was added as a sign of prudent political overture, four years after Tiananmen, in order to emphasise 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 an ‘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 of the British House of Lords), its role, organisation and membership remain very different. As an official Chinese website indicates: ‘Cooperative relations between the CCP and other political parties are based on the principle of “long-term coexistence and mutual supervision, treating each other with full sincerity and sharing weal or woe”’.\(^9\)

**CPPCC Organisation**

The CPPCC is an institution comprising a National Committee (today 2,237 members) and 3,118 local committees (totalling 632,000 members)\(^10\) at the provincial, municipal (or prefectoral), 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 (298 members) that meets every two months. Standing Committee 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 15 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 multi-party cooperation and political consultation led by the CCP’\(^11\) in other words in propagating the 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 1, below), but also several mass organisations, such 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 23 vice chairpersons and 65% of the Standing Committee members). However, its key leader is the director of the CCP United Front Department, today Ling Jihua, who runs the day-to-day operation of this assembly, with the assistance of secretary general Zhang Qingli, another CCP Central Committee member and former Party secretary of Tibet and then Hebei. 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

\(^8\) *Ibid.*


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. At the 11th CPPCC National Committee (2008–2013), they numbered 895 (40%) while non-communists amounted to 1,342 (60%). There were 393 women, accounting for 18%. All of China’s 56 ethnic groups are represented and, as a result, minorities are over-represented. Leaders of the major authorised religious groups (67 members), the 8 ‘democratic parties’ (380), members of the intelligentsia (scientists, professors, doctors, writers, artists) as well as compatriots from Hong Kong (124) and Macau (29) also sit in this August assembly.

In the last 15 years, more and more celebrities (for example the movie director Zhang Yimou and hurdler Liu Xiang) and wealthy entrepreneurs have been co-opted into joining what is often described as a ‘riches’ club (furen jiulebu). In 2011, 20 of the top Chinese executives whose 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 Minghe, Chairman of Ping An Insurance and Li Shaojie, President of China Shipping Group. While state-owned enterprise 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 on the 11th CPPCC (75 are NPC delegates) side-by-side with the usual Hong Kong and Macau pro-Beijing tycoons. Lately, the top representatives of foreign companies have also joined this ‘temple of celebrities’ (mingren tang), for example, Fang Fang, the China Chief Executive of JPMorgan. Nevertheless, more traditional elites, for example, 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 are represented in the national and local CPPCCs. In 2013, 83 billionaires have been reported to have been elected to the new NPC (31) and CPPCC (52), including Robin Li Yanhong of Baidu, Yang Yuanqing of Lenovo and Cao Dewang of Fuyao Glass.

The same trends can be observed in the local CPPCCs. Moreover, the membership of different CPPCCs can partly overlap, since leaders of local CPPCCs also belong to the CPPCC of the immediate higher level.

CPPCC members are not elected officially, but are selected by consultation and recommendation from 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 Department and appointed by the Communist Party Committee of the same level. It is hard for a ‘candidate’ to refuse such an offer and usually, he or she accepts in order 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.

In the last decade an increasing number of CPPCC members have been expelled for corruption, others due to a lack of attendance, or the adoption of citizenship of another country, for example, 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), Chen Shaogi, 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.

The CPPCC leadership is aware of the growing corruption of its members but prefers to rely on education rather than repression to solve the problem. In March 2012, Dong Lianghui, a CPPCC member and the daughter of late leader Deng

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Biwu, declared that ‘corruption can mainly be attributed to a lack of education and values’.  

Competences

CPPCCs do not have any legislative powers but 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 sentiment, 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 2008 and 2013, the CPPCC handled 26,699 proposals (against 23,000 between 2003 and 2008). 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.

Indeed, 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 (USD 4.2 bn) 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 also serve to publicise the activities of the ‘democratic parties’ (see Appendix 1). For example, between 1990 and 2006, these groups 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 total CPPCC proposals.

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 views 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 CPPCCs into a platform for daring criticism; a loudspeaker for China’s current problems and social tensions. However, some CPPCC members use it as a platform for 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 viewed as politically correct and, instead of pushing for a genuine political reform, contribute to legitimising the current CCP-led political system.

CPPCC membership does not constitute 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

Although 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. True, the CPPCCs are supposed to provide advice and supervision to China’s political leadership. And they help the latter to better communicate with, and win 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 offers to expand their business and bureaucratic connections. Moreover, their proposals are rarely translated into policies.

Some criticism has been expressed along these lines in China and some have even called for an abolition of the CPPCCs. However, this 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 CCP leadership decides to embark into a meaningful political reform process. Since they took office in November 2012 and March 2013 respectively, neither CCP Secretary General Xi Jinping nor Premier Li Keqiang have given any indication that they would move in that direction; in fact, quite the opposite. As a consequence, it is fair to conclude that in the foreseeable future the CPPCC will stick to its role and probably try to both diversify its membership and better check the government’s activities.

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

Appendix 1

China’s Eight ‘Democratic Parties’

The total membership of the ‘democratic parties’ (minzhu dang) was estimated in 2013 around 893,000 against 710,000 in 2011, 290,000 in 1988 and 80,000 in 1978 when they were reactivated. Their membership has increased regularly in the last 20 years, and even faster in the last few years, but the CCP (85 m members in 2013) makes sure that they do not become too large. Their finances are controlled by the CCP.

The following lists the date of establishment, the sector of society represented, estimated membership and current leader of the eight ‘democratic parties’:

1) Kuomintang’s Revolutionary Committee 國民黨革命委員會 (1948)
Ex-Kuomintang, people in relations with Taiwan, dedicated to the unification of the motherland
101,865 in 2012 (42,000 in 1992)
Chairman: Wan Exiang (since 2012)
Number of CPPCC Members: 65

2) Democratic League of China 中國民主同盟 (1941)
Middle- and senior-level intellectuals in the fields of culture, education, science and technology
230,000 in 2012 (100,000 in 1993)
Chairman: Zhang Baowen (since 2012)
Number of CPPCC Members: 65

3) Chinese Democratic Association for National Construction 中國民主建國會 (1945)
Representative figures in the economic field (entrepreneurs, managers and engineers
140,000 in 2013 (40,000 in 1988)
Chairman: Cheng Changzhi (since 2007)
Number of CPPCC Members: 65

4) Chinese Association for the Promotion of Democracy 中國民主促進會 (1945)
Representative intellectuals in the fields of education, culture, publishing and science
133,000 in 2013 (24,000 in 1988)
Chairwoman: Ms. Yan Junqi (since 2007)
Number of CPPCC Members: 45

5) Peasant and Workers Democratic Party 中國農工民主黨 (1930)
Intellectuals of the medical and health sectors
125,600 in 2013 (43,000 in 1988)
Chairman: Chen Zhu (since 2012)
Number of CPPCC Members: 45

6) Justice Party (Zhigongdang 致公黨, 1925)
Middle and upper levels of returned overseas Chinese and their relatives
28,000 in 2011 (15,000 in 1993)
Chairman: Wan Gang (since 2007)
Number of CPPCC Members: 30

7) 3 September Society 九三學社 (1944)
Representative middle- and senior-level intellectuals in the fields of science, technology, higher education and medicine
132,000 in 2012 (11,000 in 1983)
Chairman: Han Qide (since 2002)
Number of CPPCC Members: 45

8) Taiwan Democratic Autonomous League 台灣民主自治同盟 (1947)
Representative and upper-level Taiwan compatriots living in large and medium-size cities on the mainland
2,700 in 2013 (1,300 in 1992)
Chairwoman: Ms. Li Wenyi (since 2005)
Number of CPPCC Members: 20