

# Political Representation in Contemporary China: Debates and Reflections

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**Abstract:** In the essay I focus on theory and practice of political representation in contemporary China, analyze the meanings, manifestations and results of two modes of representation (descriptive representation and meritocratic representation) that try to transcend electoral representation, and, based on reflections on conventional representation theory, discuss the reassessment of the value of election for democracy and representation.

**Keywords:** electoral representation, descriptive representation, meritocratic representation

## I

Since the turn of the century, democracy around the world seems to be encountering a new crisis. While the crisis may be judged variedly by various people, it can be agreed that “the crisis of representation” is an important symptom. Contemporary democracy, as known to all, is a form of representative democracy, with its core being to realize demands of democracy through representative mechanisms. As the history of representation shows, however, the origin of representation has nothing to do with democracy. Political representation, with its roots in the medieval ages, used to be a mere expedient applied by the king to meet the needs of governance, thus devoid of any implication of democracy<sup>2</sup>. Representation is wedded with democracy until it is linked with the electoral procedure and the “one person, one vote” system. With the current

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<sup>2</sup> Pitkin, Hanna Fenichel. The Concept of Representation, in Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *Representation*, New York, Atherton Press, 1969.

development of representative democracy, however, electoral representation has been more and more frequently questioned. For example, although in contemporary Western politics, populism and technocracy are regarded as two opposing ideals of governance, or even political diseases, both populism and technocracy, to some extent, are the reflections of discontent toward electoral representation<sup>3</sup>. Populism believes election can distort the representation of the will of the people, while independent regulatory agency led by non-electoral technocrats is a response to the lack of representation for public interest in electoral mechanisms. Notably, in response to these political practices, Western academia has been reflecting on electoral representation in theoretical terms, so much so that the “rediscovery of representation” has become a heated topic in contemporary democratic theories. Discussions about the relationship between election and representation and the relationship between representation and democracy interpret and clarify the meaning of representation and its complex relationships with election and democracy, thus inspiring us to reconsider the question of representation.

Interestingly, whereas Western countries with their mature representative systems begin to reflect on electoral representation, China as a late-developing country, with a drastically different ideology from the West, has already shown its nonchalance toward electoral representation in its official political ideal and its practice. In the recent decade, the academia in China has started reflections and criticisms on electoral representation as well. For example, the leftist scholar Wang Shaoguang criticizes the oligarchical characteristics of election, and argues that the legitimacy of political representation should be based on a more equal sortition, or election by lot<sup>4</sup>. Canadian scholar Daniel A. Bell, as another example, promotes a political meritocracy based on Confucian conservatism which transcends Western liberal democracy, with its core being the linkage between elitist virtues and the legitimacy of political representation<sup>5</sup>.

In this essay, I focus on the theory and practice of political representation in China and analyze the values and limits of various attempts to transcend electoral representation, so that the

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<sup>3</sup>For more discussions on populism and technocracy, see Daniele Caramani. *Will vs. Reason: The Populist and Technocratic Forms of Political Representation and Their Critique to Party Government*, American Political Science Review, Volume 111, Issue 1, 2017, pp. 54-67.

<sup>4</sup> Wang, Shaoguang. *Four Lectures on Democracy*. SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2008. Despite his enthusiasm for sortition, Wang is not a complete supporter of descriptive representation. As I point out later in the essay, his interpretation of China’s representation has distinct meritocratic characteristics.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel A. Bell. *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*, Princeton University Press, 2015.

internal logic of China's political representation can be better understood. Based on the reflection on conventional theories of representation, the democratic value of election can be reassessed.

## II

Similar to the historical development in the West, the meaning of representation in China's context also went through a transformation from authoritarianism to democracy. In traditional China, the legitimacy of sovereignty is closely related to political representation. Only when the monarch is regarded as the representative of Tian, or heaven, can he or she have the right to reign (for example, the monarch always proclaims to be Tianzi, or son of heaven). Because of the relation between sovereignty and representation of Tian, uprisings and new dynasties often appropriate the rhetoric of Tian to accuse the monarch of losing the representativeness of Tian, using the slogan "Ti Tian Xing Dao", or to practice justice on behalf of Tian, to construct narratives of new political representation. Only after the introduction of popular sovereignty theory of the West into modern China, the object of representation began the gradual transformation from Tian to Ren, or human. From then on, Renmin, or the people, became the only object of political representation. Because both people's representatives and the democratic legitimacy of them depend on people's election, "One Person, One Vote" as an electoral system becomes one of the goals for the democratic development in modern China.

Despite election being the core institution for the communication between people and their representatives, the tension between election and democracy has always posed a challenge to the legitimacy of representation. German thinker Carl Schmitt once pointed out: "In comparison with lot, designation by election is an aristocratic method, as Plato and Aristotle rightly say. But in comparison with appointment by a higher authority or indeed with hereditary succession, this method may appear democratic."<sup>6</sup> Bernard Manin advances Schmitt's view: "The fundamental fact about elections is that they are simultaneously and indissolubly egalitarian and inegalitarian, aristocratic and democratic."<sup>7</sup> This duality of election clearly and profoundly influences electoral representation. On the one hand, as a mechanism of expression for public consent and accountability, election requires representatives to respond to public opinion as much as possible;

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Manin, Bernard. *The Principles of Representative Government*. Cambridge University Press, 1997.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

on the other hand, compared with sortition in ancient Greece, election tints representation with aristocracy. The result is the contradictory characteristic of electoral representation, i.e. the coexistence of identity and difference. Identity emphasizes the same idea, action and even personal identity between the representative and the represented, whereas difference emphasizes the varied interests, virtues and abilities between the two. Electoral representation will always face this tension within, whether in the West or China. But, because China has a context different from Western countries, it has its unique theoretical background in trying to correct and transcend electoral representation. To be more specific, most of these theories that criticize electoral representation demonstrate two kinds of representation: descriptive representation based on the principle of identity and meritocratic representation based on the principle of difference.

Descriptive representation, according to Hanna Pitkin, means that the relation of representation can be established only when based on the shared identity between the representative and the represented<sup>8</sup>. In other words, this theory of representation means that “only women can represent women”, “only workers can represent workers”, etc. According to this view, what makes one capable of being a representative is the representativeness of one’s identity – not what one does, but what one is, or, appears to be. For this theory, the realization of representation does not even need any external accountability mechanism such as election, because the presence of the representative equals the presence of the represented. The shared personal identity between the two leads to an authentic identity. Whereas electoral representation, as a formal representation theory, emphasizes the importance of the election procedure of “One Person, One Vote”, descriptive representation focuses on a substantive dimension of representation, i.e. the characteristics of the representative’s identity. For supporters of descriptive representation theory, although electoral representation is committed to the principle of fair procedure, namely, “One Person, One Vote”, it too often results in difference, or even estrangement, between the elected and the supposedly represented. Wang Shaoguang, representative of leftist democrats in contemporary China, who has been criticizing Western electoral democracy in recent years, points out that election, as its shared etymological origin with elitist ominously indicates, is inevitably tinted with elitism, thus leading to lack of representatives- who share identity with common people, with too many elite representatives in

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<sup>8</sup> Pitkin, Hanna Fenichel. *The Concept of Representation*. University of California. 1967.

the representative institution. He therefore proposes sortition as a replacement for election, so that aspects of the formation of representative institution, such as gender, race, area and profession, can reflect the represented's social structure like a mirror. This mode of representation is clearly welcomed by promoters of direct democracy who, because of the limited scale of direct democracy, accept representative democracy only as a compromise. For them, a representative institution as a minimized society is the best replication of classical ecclesia.

In fact, Wang Shaoguang, in his defense of sortitional representation, does resort to the democratic practice in ancient Greece. In his view, democracy, since its birth, is linked with sortition instead of election. The final replacement of sortition by election is the result of the elite's conspiracy against the people under the pressure of democratization<sup>9</sup>. Although as Wang points out, Greek democracy is more often linked with sortition rather than election, to explain the replacement of sortition by election only from the perspective of class struggle is to oversimplify the issue. Manin points out that the final victory of election is closely related to the introduction of the concept of consent<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, even if democracy is equivalent to sortition in ancient Greece, it does not justify descriptive representation directly. A representative institution constructed through sortition already belongs to representative democracy, whereas sortition in ancient Greece is based on the principle of direct democracy. Sortition in ancient Greece is not a way of choosing representatives, but a way of allowing people to rule in turns. Therefore, Wang is only borrowing the concept of Greek democracy strategically to oppose election. His use of sortition as a way of selecting descriptive representatives thus acknowledges the fact that modern democracy cannot avoid the structure of representation. For Wang, sortitional representation can more accurately reflect the total structure of society than electoral representation; therefore, sortition is closer to the meaning of democratic representation. But this view is obviously too radical to become a universal institutional arrangement; it can only remain as an abstract theoretical argument. If sortition is to replace election completely, it will raise more problems. For example, it will result in an impossibility to apply a rigid accountability to the representative, an insufficient will and an inability of the representative to participate, the lack of the competitiveness and argumentativeness of democratic politics, etc.

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<sup>9</sup> Wang, Shaoguang, *Four Lectures on Democracy*. SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Manin, Bernard. *The Principles of Representative Government*. Cambridge University Press, 1997.

This is not to say that descriptive representation cannot be applied to the design and practice of representative institution. In fact, as a country deeply influenced by the leftist tradition, China's political representative institution does show features of descriptive representation, mostly demonstrated in two levels, the institution of People's Congress and grassroots democracy.

First, as the highest organ of state power under the constitution, although the members of the National People's Congress (NPC) are chosen by election formally, their identities are required to reflect the social structure as broadly as possible in terms of profession, ethnical groups, age, gender and etc<sup>11</sup>. In the official discourse, this requirement is often described as to enhance the "broad representativeness" of the congress, and is seen as an institutional advantage in comparison with Western capitalist countries<sup>12</sup>. But the problem is: a voter may not vote for a representative who shares his or her identity. To make sure that representatives of certain identity can be elected, the authority has to intervene. For example, the authority may recommend candidates based on their identity<sup>13</sup>, and give guidance to the choice of the electorate in various ways. In some occasions, inappropriate actions happen, which violate people's right to vote.

Even if the ideal representatives are elected, however, the ideal of descriptive representation still may not be achieved, because when representatives become a new profession, it as a profession can distort the motives of the representatives, and even change their identity. For example, when a woman becomes a representative, she may focus more on the benefits the profession brings her and leave women's interest aside. What is worse is that when a woman still retains her identity as a woman after becoming a professional representative, a representative of the workers is no longer a worker once elected. In contemporary Western countries, supporters of descriptive representation mainly focus on the problem of group representation in terms of

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<sup>11</sup> From the perspective of representation, this arrangement demonstrates ideas of descriptive representation. But compared with a strict standard of sortitional descriptive representation, the structure of representatives in NPC clearly fails to reflect the proportions of population. Government officials are always over-represented whereas workers and farmers are inadequately represented. See Zhao Xiaoli: *On the Composition of the National People's Congress*, Peking University Law Journal, Vol.24, No. 5, 2012, pp. 973-989.

<sup>12</sup> For example, in a book of the comparison between representative institutions in capitalist countries and foreign countries, the author points out clearly that "representative institutions in capitalist countries are mainly formed by interest groups and interest classes of the propertied class that occupies only a small proportion of the population, whereas representative institution in socialist countries include representatives from various strata of the society that occupies ninety-eight percent of the national population." (See Zhou Yezhong. *A Comparative Study of Representative Institution*. Wuhan University Press, 2005, p16.)

<sup>13</sup> Candidates recommended by official organizations can generally be placed on the ballot papers, so that compared with candidates produced by other means, they have more advantages and even more potentials of winning.

gender, race and religion, so the problem of profession is largely ignored. But in China, because of the socialist tradition of professional representation, descriptive representation in the dimension of profession is greatly emphasized, which leads to a distinctly different mode of representation from mainstream Western institutions of representation: part-time representation<sup>14</sup>. When a worker is elected as a representative in congress, she does not need to give up her job as a worker, but only needs to spend a little time participating in meetings for discussions and decision-makings. Qian Duansheng, who participated in the drafting of the first Constitution of the People's Republic of China, uses descriptive representation specifically as a main reason in defense of part-time representation.

But the theory and practice of part-time representation has its obvious problems. The ability, willingness and time for politics a part-time representative has cannot be compared to a professional one, so much so that the function of representation of the congress is largely limited. The congress has even been mocked as a “rubber stamp”<sup>15</sup>. For this reason, people start to reflect upon the theoretical presuppositions of descriptive representation, and criticize the understanding of representation as an accurate presentation of the electorate’s opinions, with its connection with action and governance being neglected. This understanding of representation can at least be traced backward to John Stuart Mill, who, as an important theorist for early Western representation, sees the congress as an institution of discussion instead of governance. Proportional representation is thus regarded as a better form of election for the function of representation, even though it may raise problems like fragmentation and polarization. Walter Bagehot objects to this understanding, arguing that emphasis on the function of representation will result in a congress insufficient for governance. But just as Pitkin points out: both sides of the debate share the understanding of representation as an accurate presentation of opinions and

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<sup>14</sup> It is worth pointing out that part-time representatives can also be seen in the practice of representation in Western countries. For example, some state congress in the United States also have a few of part-time representatives. But part-time representation in Western countries is neither the main form nor present in national institutions of representation, even its justification is not necessarily related to descriptive representation.

<sup>15</sup> For example, because representatives have to work for their professional jobs, the annual plenary sessions of the National People's Congress can only last a fortnight. The time limit is likely to turn the NPC's functions of discussions and decision-making into forms without substance. For this reason, a special institution is set within the system of the NPC – the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress. Members of the standing committee are elected by representatives in the NPC. The main function of the committee is to undertake regular legislative work as a standing institution.

neglect the dimension of action in representation<sup>16</sup>. The presupposed descriptive representation in the institution of People's Congress, as well, needs to be further reflected upon.

The other important field of the practice of descriptive representation in contemporary China is grassroots democracy. A typical example is the democratic consultation in Wenling, Zhejiang Province. Since 2005, Wenling has been using sortition to select civic representatives and invite them to participate in democratic consultation on local issues such as financial budget. Compared with the descriptive representation based on election in the congress discussed above, sortitional representation appears to be closer to the ideal of descriptive representation, i.e. the broad representativeness of the representative's identity. For example, the representatives selected by sortition include a proportion of illiterate people. But this form of descriptive representation still faces two challenges in practice.

First, because the congress is the policy-making organ according to China's constitution, policy recommendations, made through consultation by citizens selected by sortition, still have to be sent to the local congress for approval. This of course means respect toward the official authority in policy-making, and to some extent helps to achieve a synergy between the unofficial civic representatives and the official political representatives, but it also implies a potential confrontation between the two modes of representation. For example, if the draft policies made by civic representatives are frequently disapproved by the official representative institution, it will lead to a further confrontation between the civic and the official or even a political crisis. The theoretical dilemma involved here is: Which kind of representation has the better claim to being representative of the people? In Lafont Cristina's view, unofficial representatives selected by sortition has no legitimacy, so they cannot participate in policy-making directly<sup>17</sup>. But for James Fishkin, a promoter for deliberate opinion poll, recommendations, made by consultations among representatives selected through sortition, reflect the true voice of the people. The implied meaning is that the possibility of using this mode of representation in official policy making cannot be easily ignored.

Second, descriptive representatives selected by sortition may be too insufficient to participate and thus affects the quality of consultation. For example, in actual discussions, illiterate representatives are often silent. Because of this problem, the local government of

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<sup>16</sup> Pitkin, Hanna Fenichel. *The Concept of Representation*. University of California. 1967.

<sup>17</sup> Lafont Cristina. *Deliberation, participation, and democratic legitimacy: should deliberative mini-publics shape public policy?* The Journal of Political Philosophy 23 (1): pp.40–63.

Wenling, since 2010, has been using a hybrid mode of representation: besides civic representatives selected by sortition, a number of representatives are selected from a predetermined talent bank of local elite including congress representatives, village representatives and retired cadres. The adjustment is opposed by theorists of deliberate democracy including Fishkin<sup>18</sup>. But for He Baogang and other theorists, the adjustment can balance and correct descriptive representation; it can be regarded as a political experiment appropriate for China's national conditions<sup>19</sup>.

I am not to judge the hybrid mode of representation in China's grassroots democracy in detail. What I want to point out is that what is mixed with descriptive representation in this hybrid mode is a kind of non-electoral representation drastically different from descriptive representation – meritocratic representation. This representation, though also based on reflections upon electoral representation, has a completely different theoretical presupposition from descriptive representation. Meritocratic representation emphasizes the difference between the representative and the represented in terms of virtue and ability. It is believed that representatives should use their reason independently to respond to, or even to construct, the true interest of the people. According to this view, electoral representation has many problems. For example, election may be more favorable to snobbish politicians than able statesmen. The accountability system of election can easily distort the motives of the representative, turning the representative into an agent for short-term benefits of the electorate. Moreover, elected representatives, constrained by the nation state and contemporary issues, can neither respond to nor represent the interest that transcends national boundaries or the interest of future generation. Because of these constraints of electoral representation, radical supporters of meritocratic representation are highly skeptical of election and even dismiss it completely. On this aspect, meritocratic representation seems similar to the idea of the British conservative Edmund Burke, but in fact it is more radical than Burke's idea. Although the representation Burke promotes can be seen as meritocratic representation, he does not deny election. Burke's argument is that a representative, once elected, should not become a yes-man to the electorate but act independently even if he will face election punishment in his electoral district<sup>20</sup>. Therefore the pursuit for meritocratic

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<sup>18</sup> See Baogang He, *Reconciling deliberation and representation: Chinese challenges to deliberative democracy*. *Representation*, vol. 51, no. 1, pp. 35-50.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> See Phyllis M. Frakt. *Mao's Concept of Representation*. *American Journal of Political Science*,

representation in contemporary China does not originate in Burke; it is closely related to the tradition of communism and the tradition of Confucianism.

For the tradition of communism, the theory of vanguardism has a huge impact on the concept of political representation of the Communist Party of China (CPC). Jing Yuejin points out that “for a proletariat party that is founded with Marxism-Leninism as its guiding principles and seizes power through violent revolution and armed combat, its political representativeness and legitimacy are based on the theoretical presupposition that the proletariat, connected with modern big industry, represents the advanced productive forces, so that the party as the vanguard of the proletariat epitomizes the political advanced nature. This advanced nature, instead of election, constructs the foundation of political representation, because the public opinions presented by election change over time.”<sup>21</sup> This understanding was further expressed in Jiang Zemin’s era as the important thought of Three Represents, stressing that CPC is not only the vanguard of the proletariat, but also the vanguard of the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people, so as to adapt the party to the post-revolution class structure emerging in China. There are, however, worries about this presentation grounded on its own advanced nature that it may deviate from public interest in its practice. CPC uses two strategies in response to these worries. The first is to recognize election as the form and procedure to produce representatives (even if they are representatives of the party or the leaders of the party who are recommended to work in the government by the party). But this recognition can result in tension between the idea of vanguardism and the principle of election. The second is to promote the “mass line”, which requires party members to pay close attention to their relationship with the mass. In other words, “doing everything for the masses, relying on them in every task”. But this strategy also faces tension from within, especially when the mass who are presupposed to be lack of political consciousness appear to have demands that contradict the will of the ruling party. Therefore, the mass line does not mean to follow the demands of the mass absolutely, but is to be based on the recognition of the party’s advanced nature. According to the official discourse of CPC, the mass line does not mean tailism. The party holds the power to make final judgements and decisions about the true interest of the people.

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Vol. 23, No.4.1979, pp. 684-704. Frakt points out that “whereas Burke allowed the concerns of the people to be conveyed through elections, Mao's policy (although endorsing elections) favored frequent mass and committee meetings. Still, both methods have an identical goal – to ascertain the needs of the public.”

<sup>21</sup> Jing, Yuejin. *Representation Theory and China's Politics*, Social Science Research, No. 3, 2007, pp. 16-21.

Whereas the meritocratic representation promoted by vanguardism still needs to respect election as a form, Confucianism presents a more thorough criticism of electoral representation. Canadian scholar Daniel A. Bell, in his book published in 2015, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*, uses Confucian meritocratic politics to criticize the Western institution of liberal democracy based on “One Person, One Vote”. Bell does not disapprove of the use of election in grassroots or even provincial politics; but he clearly states his opposition to the usage of competitive election on a national level, believing that election cannot produce foresighted, accountable political elite<sup>22</sup>.

This idea of meritocratic representation starts a huge debate in the academia. For example, how to select this kind of meritocratic representatives? In traditional China, the means was examination. But imperial examinations are designed by the authority and powerful Confucian elite, not by representative Confucian thinkers. Zhu Xi, for one, criticized the institution of imperial examinations. Another problem is: Can examinations assess the merits of men? It is more likely for examinations to select the able, not the meritorious. And what the Confucian tradition emphasizes is merit. In fact, Sun Yat-sen once tried to create an institution of examination that combines Western democracy with Confucian tradition, but failed. What, after all, is the standard of merits? In contemporary Western countries, technocratic experts committed to neutrality are becoming more and more favorable; traditional Confucianists focus more on morality; and communists value the loyalty of the party members. In the pluralistic contemporary society, merits are understood in various ways. So what form of selection is more appropriate? Is election, after all, the most appropriate way to include various standards of merits? And, in the end, what is the relation between democracy and the meritocratic representation tinted with elitism? Bell tries to clarify the difference between his view and Singapore’s authoritarianism, and argues that Hong Kong, with its social freedom and grassroots democracy, is his ideal form of meritocratic politics. But as scholars has pointed out, the meritocratic politics of Hong Kong is based on the democratic model of the United Kingdom. Civil service in the UK and the Supreme Court of the United States, both praised by Bell, are also run in the context of representative

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<sup>22</sup> Daniel A. Bell: *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*, Princeton University Press, 2015.

democracy<sup>23</sup>. As these examples demonstrate, there are still many theoretical problems to be clarified for a theory of meritocratic representation based on Confucianism.

### III

Descriptive representation and meritocratic representation in contemporary China are briefly analyzed above. The following question is: how can we assess the relationship between these two modes of non-electoral representation and their political consequences? The common view is that although descriptive representation and meritocratic representation both reflect upon and try to transcend electoral representation, they have varied interpretations of representation, so much so that the two can even become opposite to each other in practice. For example, in Canada, when Prime Minister Justin Trudeau tried to have a cabinet with equal number of male and female, this claim of descriptive representation was criticized for the neglect of merits. As to the vanguardism promoted by Lenin, there are feminists who criticize it from the perspective of descriptive representation.

Interestingly, however, descriptive representation and meritocratic representation have not dragged contemporary China into political conflicts, but appear to have an interdependent relation. Paradoxically, this relation is the result of China's over-pursuit for these two modes of non-electoral representation. On the one hand, deeply influenced by leftist tradition, China is more in favor of descriptive representation than Western countries, which leads to its need to rely on meritocratic representation to compensate the disadvantage of descriptive representation in practice. For example, to ensure that the representatives' identities can reflect the structure of the whole society, the number of representatives in the NPC is kept around three thousand; to ensure descriptive representation in the dimension of profession, part-time representation is invented. These methods result in a congress that is more like a symbolic representation which is too limited to act sufficiently, so that more practical responsibilities of representation are left to meritocratic representatives. Maybe this hidden relation between descriptive representation and meritocratic representation explains why Wang Shaoguang, the radical promoter of sortitional

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<sup>23</sup> Sungmoon Kim. *To Become a Confucian Democratic Citizen: Against Meritocratic Elitism*. British Journal of Political Science, Volume 43 - Issue 3 . 2013., pp.579 - 599.

democracy can at the same time promote a meritocracy based on the mass line.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, the over-pursuit for meritocratic representation results in difference and disconnection between the representative and the represented, which necessitates a descriptive representation that requires identity between the representative and the represented, for this descriptive representation at least provides, in psychological terms, a symbolic legitimacy for the institution of representation.

The seemingly harmonious political representation created through the complementary relation between descriptive representation and meritocratic representation, however, may bring a serious problem. The NPC is the highest organ of state power under the constitution, but its function of representation is not fully realized. In other words, the NPC should not be a mere symbolic representation, but exert its decision-making power guaranteed by constitution. The symbolic representation cannot prevent meritocratic representation from becoming the opposite of democratic representation. Thus, even though descriptive representation and meritocratic representation have their advantages comparing with electoral representation, they cannot be independence from election. It can even be said that an appropriate combination with election can help realize the political functions of these two forms of representation. Election can even be more helpful. The essential question is: How should we reassess the democratic value of electoral representation that is the core of representative democracy, when it is challenged by both descriptive representation and meritocratic representation? The question can be discussed at least from two aspects.

First, the tension between identity and difference in election can be interpreted as an advantage. In other words, electoral representation is in fact a comprehensive mode of representation that combines descriptive representation and meritocratic representation. To be specific, on the aspect of difference, election should not be understood only as a method of ensuring accountability by punishment, but also as a method of selecting meritorious representatives. A scholar has pointed out that Confucianists in late-Qing China, such as Wang

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<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, Wang invented the concept of representational democracy so as to differentiate China's political system from Western representative democracy. China's representational democracy, in his view, focuses more on a substantive response to the demands of the mass, while demands refer to needs that are objective instead of wants that are subjective. To discover the "objective needs" of the people, apparently, requires certain form of meritocratic representation. For more in detail, see Wang Shaoguang, Representational Democracy in China, Journal of the Party School of CPC Hangzhou, No.1, 2014, pp. 4-12.

Tao, see election as a mechanism of selecting the meritorious<sup>25</sup>. In Western countries, from Federalists to contemporary political theorist Jane Mansbridge, the function of selection in election has always been emphasized. Regretfully, influenced by public choice theory, election has long been understood as a mode of punishment. Therefore, for scholars like Mansbridge and Sungmoon Kim, although the mode of punishment can make the representatives accountable, a mode of selection is more likely to guide government officials toward public interest instead of self-interested motives for re-election<sup>26</sup>. One scholar even argues that contrary to Bell's view, Confucian meritocracy is not inevitably opposed to electoral representation; the introduction of the former is helpful for correcting the mode of punishment dominant in contemporary democracy and highlighting the function of selection in election<sup>27</sup>. On the aspect of identity, election has its own advantage comparing to sortition. For main supporters of descriptive representation, sortition is commonly viewed as the best way to achieve their political ideal. But simply a random draw cannot present the whole structure of population accurately. Pitkin points out that the problem with descriptive representation is that what characteristics are worth replicating is often a contextual question. Some supporters of descriptive representation therefore insist on a more thorough stratified sampling method, i.e. sortitions based on dimensions of gender, race, economic status, etc. But the question is: how should we determine the specific dimensions to be stratified? Does this mean that the organizers of sortition have the essential power to determine which dimensions are to be stratified? Both random draw and stratified sampling in fact deprive citizens of their right to choose the dimensions of descriptive representation. In this sense, election (especially in proportional representation) is more helpful than sortition for people to realize their autonomy in descriptive representation.

Second, electoral representation is more likely to realize a dynamic political representation. Although descriptive representation and meritocratic representation appear to be oppositional to each other, both presuppose a static, essentialist understanding of representation, seeing representation as a response to the pre-existed interests and opinions of the represented. The only difference between the two is that descriptive representation bases the realization of

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<sup>25</sup> Joseph Chan. *Political Meritocracy and Meritorious Rule*, edited by Daniel A. Bell and Shenyang Li, *The East Asian Challenge for Democracy: Political Meritocracy: In Comparative Perspective*. Cambridge University Press, 2013.

<sup>26</sup> Jane Mansbridge. *A Selection Model of Political Representation*. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 17(4), pp.369–398; Sungmoon Kim, *Confucian Democracy in East Asia: Theory and Practice*, Cambridge University Press, 2014.

<sup>27</sup> Nunnery O. Keohane, *Thinking about Leadership*. Princeton University Press, 2010.

representation on a shared identity between the representative and the represented, whereas meritocratic representation bases the realization of representation on the virtues and abilities of the representative. This understanding of representation is in fact a depolitized one, with the belief that representation means passively responding, replicating and discovering the pre-existed to-be represented. This understanding even dominates the traditional view on electoral representation, making electoral representation an easy target to be criticized by non-electoral representation. In a sense, in replicating accurately and discovering pre-existed demands of the electoral, electoral representation may fail to compete with descriptive representation and meritocratic representation. But the true process of representation is a dynamic, ever-constructing political process. Just as the prefix “re-” in the word representation implies, representation is to re-present; it is a everlasting process of exploring, not an once-for-all act. In this process, the object of representation is shown through continuing debates and constructions among varied subjects. In other words, the object of representation cannot be detached from the process of representation<sup>28</sup>. Therefore, compared with descriptive representation and meritocratic representation, electoral representation does not need to be advantageous at replicating or discovering a pre-existed people, for it has a dynamic, constructionist characteristic that posits representation in a mutual-constructing process full of tension within.

## Conclusion

As mentioned above, in Western countries that have mature institutions of representative democracy, the legitimacy of electoral representation has been more and more frequently questioned, and forms of non-electoral democratic representation are emerging. These new forms of representation can surely help us transcend the limits of electoral system, but the problem is: will such reflections and revisions lead to the marginalization of electoral representation and even the total deconstruction of its legitimacy? In fact, if representation is merely understood as a suboptimal alternative to the impossible direct presence of the people, or as a replication or discovery of preexisted subjective wants and objective needs, the understanding may not result in people's mere suspicion toward election, but a complete rejection toward representation. The

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<sup>28</sup> For this constructionist understanding of representation, see Nadia Urbinati, *Representative democracy: Principles and Genealogy*, University Of Chicago Press, 2008.

international Occupy movement in 2011 is seen as an example of a new form of politics that rejects the principles of representation<sup>29</sup>. Therefore, how to reinterpret and clarify the values and limits of election-based representative democracy is the big question democratic theories have to respond to urgently. In contemporary China, because election has been questioned and challenged recurrently in the country's hundred-year history of democratization, non-electoral representation has more room for maneuver than in the West. But exactly because of this, the country has to be more alert to the challenges and impact this transcendence from electoral representation may bring to democracy. Thus, even though electoral representation faces all kinds of challenges and skepticisms, its value to democracy and representation still needs to be reassessed and treated with seriousness, whether in China or in the West.

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<sup>29</sup> Simon Tormey. *The End of Representative Politics*, Polity, 2015.