

**INNOVATIONS IN CHINA'S
LOCAL GOVERNANCE:
AN ASSESSMENT**

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Executive Summary

1. A “free and democratic China” was once a rally cry for the Chinese communist revolution. Over time, the Communist Party of China (CPC) has shifted its position from a universal understanding to a class-based one (capitalist vs. proletarian democracy), and then, to a culturally specific one (Western vs. Chinese democracy).
2. For the past decade, a hegemonic discourse has taken shape within the CPC, which claims that countries can have different democracies. Although in the West it is widely acknowledged that countries can be democratic in a different way, the Chinese official position has essentialized the current democratic system as “Western” and fundamentally questioned its universality.
3. Under the official guideline of an “organic unity” of the CPC as the leadership, the people as the masters and the rule of law, the Chinese government and the academia have tried to formulate a functional democratic polity that would not have to replicate the “Western democracy”.
4. For the past decade (2000-2010), although no national political reform had ever been attempted, hundreds of local innovations had been initiated and experimented to build democratic governance.
5. A review of four macro-cases and eight micro-cases in the political realm found that they “blossom and wilt, but bear no fruit”. Under the current political and ideological constraints, numerous local initiatives and innovations have failed to support the Chinese democracy; even worse, ultimately, they have fallen into political neglect or been suspended.
6. The uneven developments in the economy and political democracy are portrayed by Premier Wen Jiabao to be like a person walking on two legs of different lengths.

7. The futile effort of improving Chinese democratic governance through perfecting technicalities in governance has revealed a widening gap between the urgent need of the citizens and the delivery by the ruling elite.
8. There are at least four obstacles to China's response to the democratic challenge: ideological conservatism, institutional gridlock at the top leadership, lack of courage and vision of Hu Jintao, and resistance of vested interests against any changes to the status quo. Together, they have made an orderly top-down democratization elusive.