

Zhou Ruijin

THREE MISSED OPPORTUNITIES IN CHINA'S POLITICAL STRUCTURAL  
REFORM

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*[Zhou Ruijin, a journalist who was once deputy editor-in-chief of the People's Daily, the Party's official newspaper, is a major spokesman for the reform tendency in China. In 1992 a series of articles he published under the penname of Huangfu Ping (connoting something like "a supporter of Deng Xiaoping in Shanghai") paving the way for the round of radical economic reforms introduced after Deng Xiaoping's "southern tour" that year. In this document he outlines a broad program of political reform, something that has been on the agenda since the late 1970s but has shown very little progress. His specific proposals here call for a kind of inner-party democracy based upon checks and balances, a return to the program outlined in the first "lost opportunity" he discusses below, Deng Xiaoping's comments in 1980 (and one wonders whether Zhou might have been the ghost writer there). In addition Zhou calls for a separation of Party and government and the Party's adherence to law: the Party should set policy and supervise its execution, but the actual implementation should be left to the government and the Party must adhere to the laws passed by the People's Congress (those same laws, presumably, drafted and supported by the Party anyway). If put into practice, though, Zhou's program would seem to subvert the role of the Communist party as a coherent, disciplined organization, becoming, rather, a competitive coalition of elites: in some ways, and changing what needs to be changed, reminiscent of the role of the Democratic party in the American "solid south," not generally thought of as a model of democratic*

*governance. A political science critique of Zhou's proposal might suggest that his desired results would be better served by keeping the Communist party as a coherent organization while allowing other parties to compete against it.]*

On the morning of November 7 2014 the Venerable Zhou Ruijin gave a speech on “Consensus on Political Structural Reform: The Goal of Reform and the Choices of the Route,” at the first session of the Dameisha<sup>1</sup> Conference on Innovation. He reviewed the decades-long hard road of political reform in China, expressing the long-cherished wishes for reform of the older generation of specialists. With the permission of Venerable Zhou and those in charge of the conference, Fenghuang Daxue Wen presents the full text of the speech by Venerable Zhou:

I have reached the age of three score years and ten. Like many other old Party members and old cadres I have paid deep and close attention to political structural reform in our country. Right now our country has reached an important juncture: Since we have made so many tremendous strides in economic power, we are at the point where it is necessary to address and resolve the problems of the gap between rich and poor, the spread of corruption, and injustices in social development.

There are lots of problems today, all of them related to the delay in political structural reform. We need a generation of collective leadership with great wisdom, great daring, and great abilities, who have a sense of responsibility toward the times, who are sincere idealists and humanists who will bravely push for political structural reform.

1. Putting it simply, our country's political system took shape after the establishment of New China. Our Party acted in accord with our national character and set up a

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<sup>1</sup> Dameisha is a resort area in Shenzhen.

structure based upon the Political Consultative Conference and the Common Program. The goal was to bring about a society based upon New Democracy. We set up a coalition government with the Communist Party at its core, in cooperation with multiple other parties. Lots of chief personages in the democratic parties entered the leading stratum of the Central People's Government. This played an important role at the time of the beginning of the new state in restoring the national economy, stabilizing the social and political situation, and in mobilizing the entire people for the War to Resist America and Aid Korea. In 1954 the first session of the National People's Congress was held and passed the first constitution for New China. Subsequently, although the system of political consultation remained, there was a great change in multi-party consultation and in coalition government. Our country's political system had the goal of building socialism and imported many things from the political system of the Soviet Union. It became a system in which "one Party controls the government in cooperation with other parties." The democratic parties became consultative organizations under the leadership and control of the CPC. With the struggle against the rightists,<sup>2</sup> our government came under the influence of "leftist" thought and line. Governmental power became ever more concentrated and the excesses imported from the Soviet system became increasingly prominent. Our country's 30 years' exploration of the building of socialism led to horrendous results. Those of my generation have personal experience of an endless series of campaigns, of rectifications, of blind accusations, slanders, lies, starvation, culminating in the chaos of the "Cultural Revolution." China's reform and opening had

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<sup>2</sup> In 1957. Chairman Mao had called for greater freedom of speech: "Let a hundred flowers bloom, a hundred schools contend." Those who took too great an opportunity of this were labeled "rightists."

its starting point and basis precisely with political structural reform. The older generation of Communist revolutionaries, represented by Deng Xiaoping, Chen Yun, Ye Jianying, Hu Yaobang, and others gave hard and bitter thought to the defects of our political system and made the decision at the third plenum of the Party's Eleventh Congress [in December 1978] to discard the chaotic and restore the right, to take the new road of reform and opening.

2. There have been three missed opportunities for political structural reform in the 30 years of reform and opening; China's political reform has let three opportunities go by.

The first was in June of 1980. The Central Politburo Standing Committee discussed the elimination of feudalism and a change in the form of the state. In August the Politburo held an enlarged meeting to discuss changes in the system of the Party and the state. Comrade Deng Xiaoping, representing the Standing Committee, made an important speech titled "Changes in the System of the Party and the State." He said that an overconcentration of power was the basic trait of the traditional political system and the general source of all its ills. There was no separation of government and Party; the Party replacing the government was a major defect of the traditional political system. He emphasized that "problems in the leadership system and the organizational system are basic, comprehensive, well-established, and enduring." Therefore, political structural reform should be on the agenda of the Party and the state. Later, because of the workers' strikes led by Poland's Solidarity Union, the leading stratum became worried about repercussions here and delayed taking steps toward political reform.

Six years later, in May of 1985, Deng Xiaoping once again raised the issue of political reform. On June 28 he said to the Politburo Standing Committee: "If all we ever

do is economic reform and don't work on political structural reform, we won't be able to accomplish the economic reform. This is because it will be blocked by people. Speaking from that perspective, none of our reforms will succeed in the end, because the decisive factor is in political structural reform." "With every step taken in economic reform, we sense more deeply the necessity for political structural reform. Without a change in the political structure we cannot guarantee the success of reform of the economic structure, or that economic reform will continue to go forward." At that time the Center set up a five-man study group on political structural reform, and this drafted "Thoughts Concerning a General Program for Political Reform." The Seventh Plenum of the 12<sup>th</sup> Congress passed that program without any problems but didn't publicize it to the outside. The fifth section of the Political Report to the Thirteenth Congress gave a summary of the contents of that Program, mentioning the separation of Party and government, consultation and dialog, informing the masses about important matters, promoting institutional reform, basic level democracy, so forth. At that venue, Zhao Ziyang forcefully advocated political structural reform with the full support of Deng Xiaoping. But because of the political storms of the spring and summer of 1989, one more good opportunity was lost.

The third time was in the spring of 1997, on the eve of the Fifteenth Party Congress. At that time a group of provincial and department-level cadres at the Central Party School proposed that the Congress take up the task of political structural reform. General Secretary Jiang Zemin had entrusted the drafting of the documents for the Congress to Comrade Wen Jiabao, and he came to the Party School to listen to their opinions. Later he communicated to them General Secretary Jiang Zemin's opinion that it was not timely

for the Congress to deal with that topic; rather, that between the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Congresses there should be a Central Plenary Meeting devoted specially to studying that question. Who would have thought that later on there would be the NATO attack on our embassy in Yugoslavia and that the Falun Gong would hold a demonstration surrounding the Central South Sea,<sup>3</sup> and so the idea of a plenary session discussing political structural reform died aborning.

3. After looking back on the experience of the past 30 years attempting to achieve political structural reform, I can at least make the following five points:

A. There must be a correct grasp of strategic opportunities. Crisis forces reform, and a challenge is also an opportunity. The collective leadership of reform must have a daring vision and set of tactics for promoting the interests of the state and the nation. It must have the kind of idealism that led Deng Xiaoping to implement the retirement system in the early 1980s<sup>4</sup> and the leadership in the early 1990s forcefully to push forward market structural reform.

B. Political structural reform is the adjustment of situations of advantage. It requires that the leaders have the courage and political skill to make these adjustments. It demands that the leadership collective truly adopt the common good of the Party, govern for the sake of the people, be honest and self-disciplined, daring to make sacrifices. At a minimum they must punish corruption and not fall into the cesspool of money and sex.

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<sup>3</sup> A park adjacent to the Imperial Palace that contains many Party offices as well, at least in the past, the residences of the main Party leaders.

<sup>4</sup> This mandated compulsory retirement for cadres at the age of 70, creating vacancies for younger functionaries. For the first few years after this was instituted the higher-ranking former cadres were included in a Central Advisory Commission. This was later abolished, but it is apparent that retired leaders typically continue to be able to exercise a considerable amount of influence behind the scenes.

C. We must promote a plurality of themes in reform. We must avoid allowing special interest groups to use public authority to monopolize the distribution of social resources or the discourse on reform. We must prevent the development of areas where “the state advances while the people retreat.” At a time when we cannot hope for omniscient political heroes and since political authority itself has become a matter of interests, we can only depend on following the rules of the game and promote a pluralistic political reform. We should encourage self-government at the basic levels and support the formation of citizen groups. That will be a motive force propelling political reform.

D. Ideological change is a major component of political structural reform. We must prevent social ideology and morality from becoming empty or nihilistic, leading to a disparity between social knowledge and action and to a vacuum of faith. Investigations reveal that what local cadres respect most are neither Marxism nor western democracy, but, rather, the covert rules of officialdom. Some of official authority has become a matter of private interest; officials do not declare their wealth, are unable to declare their wealth, as much of it derives from corruption. This has brought the official ideology, the very root of the state, into doubt and disrepute. Therefore, while the 30 years of reform have made China an economic giant, we are still lacking a great modern Chinese culture. We can export products “made in China,” but in our hearts we lack an open and free cultural spirit. There is a disparity in our ideology and in our morality. Our words and actions do not accord with each other. This has damaged the social atmosphere. We have an urgent need to show forth the frankness and honesty of the reform stage, expelling all that is filthy and rotten, courageously moving straight ahead in a fearless creative spirit. In order to promote ideological reform we must promote development of the internet

media and the media of the capital, establishing a fair and democratic forum on the internet. Secondly, we need to promote reform in the management of the news media, developing the supervisory function of public opinion, particularly in freeing up public opinion inside the system. We must encourage experts to speak out honestly and become good at listening to different opinions, including those sounds that grate upon our ears.<sup>5</sup>

E. Political structural reform is a matter of our reforming ourselves. The difficulties are enormous; the issue is extremely sensitive. Therefore we must pay attention to institutional arrangements and to the appropriate tactical measures. We must say less, do more. We must avoid making too much fuss and keep up our appetite for the job. We must advance with small steps, allow for experiments that don't work out, feeling our way as we gain experience.

#### 4. Political Structural Reform Is a Goal With Six Paths Leading to It.

We should say that the goal of political structural reform is a clear one. General Secretary Xi Jinping has said we should “rule the state according to the constitution,” “exercise government by the constitution.” This means establishing a constitutional political system. The reform of modern Chinese politics is marked by the appearance of modern Chinese political parties, beginning from the movement to set up a constitution in the last period of the Qing dynasty. The Chinese term for “constitutional government” (宪政) dates from that time. However, even a hundred years later, it is difficult to see just what that term really means. In fact, so-called constitutional government means that the constitution has transcendent power, putting controls and limits on any exercise of public power. This scientific path of promoting this kind of political reform and eliminating

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<sup>5</sup> A proverbial saying: “Loyal words grate upon the ears” (忠言逆耳).



corruption has been the work of China's wise and courageous heroes for more than 100 years, as they wore out their brains and spilled their blood to save the nation and find a way to national revival. Right now, many thoughtful people inside and outside the Party feel worried, fearing that out of control corruption constitutes a grave legal challenge to the ruling party. The most effective way to eliminate corruption is through countervailing power. No party, group, or individual can have special powers that go beyond the constitution and the law. We must treat the constitution as the root of all action. There is a high degree of consensus that this is what socialist constitutionalism is. We must follow the normal rules of a civilization based on the rule of law, learn to adapt the excellent achievements of all civilizations based on the rule of law, putting great effort into building socialist constitutionalism. Toward that goal, the following are paths to choose in the approach to political structural reform.

A. Depending on law to rule the country should become the basic direction of the CPC in administering the government and reviving the state. The 4<sup>th</sup> plenum of the 18<sup>th</sup> Congress passed a decision on depending on law to rule the country. That is a good start. As a ruling party the CPC must go a step further in adjusting its thinking away from that of a revolutionary party and reforming and perfecting its leadership and governing methods according to the demands of ruling the state according to law. The essence and basic issue in political structural reform lies in reforming the Party's leadership methods and system of ruling the country. In the past, when class struggle constituted the nexus and our methods of Party leadership and government administration held to "monolithic Party leadership," this implied that the Party organization exercised governmental power (no separation of Party and government), that government was exercised according to

Party policy, that Party leaders directly exercised governmental authority. There has been a fairly big change in this regard. By and large, Party leadership now sets the general direction, proposes legislation, and appoints the more important cadres. Political and organizational leadership over society is exercised by the Party according to law. The governing functions of each Party organization are transmitted by guidance and support of the National Congress, the government, the Consultative Conference, and popular groups. The power of the state is exercised through political institutions, administrative institutions, legal institutions, and through the institutions of the popular groups, so that these may carry out their leadership functions in a lively manner, strengthen institutional construction, and guarantee the legality of the Party's policies. We need to pass a law on the relationship between the governing Party and the authoritative institution of the state, and similar such laws, so that the Party rule is carried out within the scope of the constitution and that it depends upon the exercise of the law.

B. We must strengthen the Party's democratic core, promote people's democracy, ceaselessly work to perfect the system of social democracy. The CPC must undertake reform of the institutions, setting up a complete system of inner-Party democracy that reflects the will of Party members and Party organizations. Thus, in certain counties or towns there might be set up experiments in Party representative assemblies, actively exploring during the term of a Party Congress new paths and forms of various functions for Party representatives. At the same time, on the basis of guaranteeing the democratic rights of Party members, we should go a step further in bringing to perfection the Party Congress system and the system of Party committees. Competitive elections (差额选举) must become universal throughout the Party in order to guarantee the

free election rights of Party members. We should set up a democratic process, keep to the principle that the minority obeys the majority, guarantee that the opportunities for discussion and decision-making within the Party committee go a step further in becoming more democratic. We must prevent allowing the main responsible persons, whether one man or a small group, being able to dictate the results. The Central Committee must also implement a democratic election system, opening a new phase in democratic elections within the Party.

C. Select new measures and systems, ceaseless strengthening restraints on and supervision over power. There is a weak environment in the Chinese political system and behavior for placing limitations on and supervision over the exercise of power. This is at the root of many major instances of corruption. We must go a step further in strengthening the systems of supervision over civil servants, especially high-ranking cadres. We must gradually set up a system for reporting on the finances of leading cadres. We must bring to perfection procedures on decisions on the appointment and removal of major cadres, promoting a system whereby leading cadres are publicly nominated and publicly elected. We must set up a system whereby party committees and people's congresses can question leading cadres and demand answers from them. We must give attention to developing the supervisory function of public

opinion, protect the ability of the media to discuss political matters and to exercise supervision over public officials.

D. Go a step further toward perfecting the people' s congress system and the system of multi-party cooperation, conscientiously guaranteeing that the people can be masters of their own house. The people' s congress system and the system of multiparty cooperation are the basis of our country' s political system. The broad mass of the citizenry should be able to participate in an orderly way as we gradually move to assure that in both urban and rural areas NPC representatives are allocated according to population ratios. We must guarantee the people' s right to know, right to participate, right to express themselves, right to supervise. We must go a step further in establishing a committee system within the NPC, improving the structure of the component personnel, strengthening their talent in law and social management. We must guarantee capacity of the highest organs of power to operate according to law. We must strengthen transparency and public participation in decision-making. Hereafter, that for all laws, regulations, and public policy closely pertaining to the well-being of the masses, the NPC should hold open hearings to listen to the opinions of the masses, giving attention to redressing the grievances of the popular masses. At the same time, the NPC is the authoritative

institution in our country, It has legislative power, decision-making power, supervisory power, especially the ability to hold the government to account. In setting out the budget the NPC should in the future play a decision-making role and a supervisory role. We should strengthen the NPC' s fiscal functions, setting up a modern financial system, setting up a separation of finance from government, with a system of checks and balances. We should develop the system of multiparty cooperation. The outstanding members of the democratic parties should enter the government, the courts, cultural organizations, and popular organizations in positions of power and responsibility. We can also explore having them enter the NPC in their capacity as party members.<sup>6</sup> Members of the democratic parties should also be able to issue secondary reports, exercising supervision through public opinion over the ruling party.

E. Speed up reform of the administrative and management systems, establish a government by rule of law geared toward service. The basic demands are to increase professional competence, smooth out management, improve the structures, and raise the level of efficiency. The government should not interfere in the microeconomy; it should not stand

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<sup>6</sup> In the current system, the role of the tame minor parties is to cooperate with the CPC, not compete against it. Individuals in principle are allowed to run for elected office as individuals, but not as representatives of a group or party (other than the CPC).

in the front lines in promoting commerce and bringing in capital. It should not be on intimate terms with new commercial ventures; rather, it must put efforts into doing a good job in adjusting macroeconomic conditions, supervising the market, putting its efforts into social management and public services. To the greatest extent possible it should reduce the need for administrative approvals, separating government from enterprise, government from business, government from market organizations. It should enhance the capacity of governmental agencies, decreasing the number of administrative strata, reduce the amount of funds available to administration. It should explore new paths for the rectification of administrative organs, putting effort into reducing administrative over-staffing, the separation of office from responsibility, the surplus of administrative venues. Get rid of the concept in government of “giving heavy attention to management, a light attention to service; heavy attention to economics, light attention to society.” Rather, strengthen social management and public services, ceaselessly elevate the capacity of the government for social management and public service, transforming the government to one dedicated to public service. We should promote transparency in governmental decision-making, in fiscal work, in employment. Administration should adhere to law, be honest and efficient, solicitous of the demands of the people.

We should strive for a government and officialdom open to public criticism and evaluation, a government of laws. We must firmly prevent public government power becoming the property of special interest groups; power must not become departmentalized, the departments transformed into interest groups, and policies adopted to accord with interests.

F. Set up a system of base level self-government by the masses, guaranteeing that citizens can exercise their democratic rights. Our country for a long time has implemented an “omnicompetent” model of politics, in which the government takes over the entire management of society. The masses at the basic level lack democratic rights. As our country’s economic reform deepened, the social structure underwent profound changes, localized interests were adjusted in a deepened manner. There were deeper changes in ideological concepts, people’s thinking became more lively and independent, more choosy, more varied, better able to distinguish differences, then political participation and demands became increasingly insistent. Value choices became increasingly pluralized. Therefore there was a change in the “omnicompetent” model. There developed a tripartite structure of civil society: the public power of the government, the self-governing power of society, and the power of the market to distribute resources. All of these must be combined into a harmonious society. The 17<sup>th</sup> Congress was the first time

in the Party' s history that a system of self-government by the basic-level masses was made into an important part of the agenda of socialist democratic politics. This is a new system in the building of our country' s democratic politics that has attracted a lot of attention. Hereafter base-level mass self government will march forward with giant steps, as the popular masses exercise their democratic rights according to law. The public management of the base-level and of the work of the common good will be done through self-management, self-service, self-education, self-supervision, and also with democratic supervision over base-level cadres and civil servants. In the manner, it is necessary to enliven civic organizations, allow them directly to take on the responsibilities of society. They will be better able actively to develop public services, reflecting demands, acting in an exemplary fashion in increasing the capacity of social self-government.

*Fenghuang Daxue Wen*, November 7, 2014.