

An Overview of the Development of Urban and Rural Grassroots Democracy in China

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ABSTRACT

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China's grassroots democracy is an essential manifestation of China's democratic politics and has formed the grassroots mass autonomy system through long-term practice. Since 1982, every National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) has made arrangements to promote grassroots democracy in China. The Organic Law of Villagers' Committees of the People's Republic of China (adopted for trial implementation in 1987 and formalised in 1998) strengthened grassroots democracy in China. Subsequently, significant progress has been made in developing grassroots democracy within Chinese rural and urban communities. This paper explores the CPC's arrangements for grassroots democracy in rural and urban communities by comparative analysis, mainly examining the differences within four interrelated dimensions: a) election provisions, b) voter competence, c) levels of political participation, and d) autonomy content. Then, it put forward suggestions to improve grassroots democracy in China. In practice, it has formed a differentiated "governance democracy" model that integrates institutional empowerment, technology-driven methods, and social training tools. The practice of grassroots democracy in urban and rural areas should shift from "formal coverage" to "improving efficiency".

1. Introduction

The development of grassroots democracy in China has attracted sustained scholarly attention, particularly for its unique institutional design and governance logic. Rather than adhering to a linear path of liberal democratic development, China's grassroots has progressed through a pragmatic process shaped by the CPC's governance strategies, reflecting a complex interplay of historical influences, political ideologies, and socio-economic transformation (Bell, 2015). Existing research demonstrates that participatory mechanisms at the local level have been enhanced through policy experimentation and incremental reforms, while remaining grounded within a framework of strong CPC

leadership. This dual nature has prompted continuous discussions about the nature and effectiveness of democratic practices within China's local governance system.

China's grassroots democracy is a crucial expression of the country's democratic politics, evolving into a system of grassroots mass autonomy through prolonged practice (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2021). Many scholarly works document the historical development of grassroots democracy, encompassing its emergence in revolutionary base areas, institutional consolidation during the socialist era, and notable reforms following the decentralisation of economic and administrative authority in 1978 (Balme, 2005; He et al., 2020). Specifically, the implementation of village-level elections in the 1980s is widely recognised as a pivotal milestone in rural governance, providing institutionalised channels for local participation under the CPC's supervision. Nevertheless, much of this academic work remains predominantly descriptive, focusing on institutional evolution and policy milestones, while comparative studies of how grassroots democracy operates in urban and rural environments are scarce.

This gap is particularly evident in how urban and rural grassroots governance are treated as largely separate. Rural research typically highlights village committees and electoral processes, while urban studies focus on consultative participation and administrative coordination. This division overlooks the common institutional roots of grassroots democracy and obscures how factors such as urbanisation, governance skills, and social structure shape different democratic practices locally. Consequently, current research offers an incomplete view of the internal diversity and real-world operation of grassroots democracy in modern China.

This paper fills this gap by comparing grassroots democracy in rural and urban communities, focusing on the CPC's institutional structures, citizen participation patterns, and governance outcomes. By exploring similarities and differences between these settings, the study evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of China's grassroots democratic practices and identifies structural factors influencing their effectiveness. The analysis contributes to broader discussions of non-Western democratic models and local governance by offering a systematic comparison grounded in China's socio-political context.

The paper proceeds in five parts, beginning with a review of the literature on democracy followed by a deliberation of the theoretical framework guiding the analysis. The second offers a comparative analysis of rural and urban grassroots democracy, while the third explores potential ways to improve Chinese grassroots democratic practices. And the forth is the conclusion.

2. Literature Review

Democracy encompasses specific government institutions and the relationships between the state and its citizens, including various groups and individuals. A global overview of democracies reveals three prominent types of political systems: liberal democracy, Marxism-Leninism (or Communism), and authoritarianism (Howard et al., 2001/2004, 1). The development and evolution of democracy is a complex historical process that has manifested in diverse forms across different cultures and eras. This article reviews the literature to outline the general democracy, its importance, and the

key stages and milestones in the history of democratic development in the Chinese context.

2.1 Theoretical Framework and Empirical Limits of Democracy

This study adopts Robert A. Dahl's *On Democracy* as a foundational analytical framework. Rather than treating democracy as a single institutional arrangement, Dahl (2020) delineates ten primary advantages of democratic systems, which can be analytically categorised into three thematic claims. Firstly, democracy serves as a safeguard of individual rights by resisting autocratic oppression, protecting fundamental liberties, and enabling citizens to defend their core interests. Secondly, democracy focuses on self-actualisation, asserting that democratic regimes offer the best opportunities for individual autonomy, moral responsibility, and the promotion of human development and political equality. Finally, Dahl points out that modern representative democracies generally experience fewer interstate conflicts and tend to attain greater economic prosperity. These claims collectively reflect the classical expectations placed upon democratic governance, particularly its capacity to constrain arbitrary power, protect individual autonomy, and institutionalise citizen participation.

However, the empirical validity and universal applicability of these normative claims remain contested. Some of Dahl's propositions—especially regarding the presumed peaceful nature of democratic states and their superior economic performance—tend to rely on generalised correlations rather than context-sensitive causal mechanisms. National stability is influenced by intricate geopolitical, institutional, and historical factors that cannot be reduced to a single regime type. Likewise, economic performance depends on structural factors such as resource endowments, technological ability, human capital, and the capacity of the state. As Jayal (2009, pp. 326-337) argues, a persistent gap often exists between the normative promises of democracy and its substantive outcomes, whereby procedural democratic arrangements do not necessarily guarantee effective representation, social equity, or developmental performance (Jayal et al., 2009, pp. 326–337). Furthermore, as Dahl et al. (2026) emphasise, democratic systems exhibit significant variation across countries due to differences in historical trajectories, territorial size, social heterogeneity, and institutional design. These observations suggest that democracy should be understood not as a uniform model but as a context-dependent governance configuration whose outcomes are mediated by local conditions and institutional capacities.

2.2 An overview of Democratic Development Stages in China

The historical narrative of Chinese democracy, although often seen as a linear development towards institutional perfection, reveals the ongoing tension between participatory speech and centralised political control by examining its evolution. New mechanisms for popular participation have been introduced at each stage of development, but democratic practice has always been placed under the primary tasks of national construction, social stability, and party leadership. The following comments critically evaluate these stages, emphasising the functional logic, institutional limitations, and academic debates of each period.

2.2.1 Democratic Revolution Period (1921-1949)

This stage establishes the initial organisational infrastructure and participatory norms, which are fundamental. However, these practical innovations are fundamentally tools for revolutionary warfare and mass mobilisation, rather than experiments of democratic citizens. The representative institutions and village elections aim to organise collective action for wartime resource exploitation and conscription; they participate in serving the 'organisational goals' rather than achieving competitive representation (Yang et al., 2021). As pointed out by Chen et al. (2025), mechanisms such as mass meetings achieve "broad inclusiveness with low administrative costs," but this inclusiveness is aimed at integrating the people into the revolutionary hierarchy, rather than giving them the power to oppose it. As Thornton (2008) stated, Mao's concept of "New Democracy" is a "transitional system" oriented towards socialist transformation - a temporary alliance of classes under the firm leadership of the Communist Party. This instrumentalisation creates a persistent path dependence: grassroots governance is valued for its ability to execute central directives, a logic that persists for a long time after the success of the revolution. Therefore, the legacy left during this period is not autonomous local power, but an administrative coordination channel that blurs the boundary between public institutions and state infiltration (Liu, 2022).

2.2.2 New China Socialist Exploration and Practice Period (1949-1978)

After 1949, China entered a political landscape driven by state-led radical institutional reforms and large-scale mobilisation. The land reforms and collectivisation campaigns after 1949 indeed guided participation, through "high-intensity political movements," which were mobilizational rather than democratic in any procedural sense (Meisner, 1999, pp. 85-112). As political authority gradually moves towards extreme centralisation, the weakening of intra-party constraints begins to paralyse the operational mechanism of democratic centralism. In various regions, the suspension of formalised congresses and organisational agreements has hindered the autonomy of grassroots units, leading to profound institutional fragility (MacFarquhar et al., 2006, pp. 241-268). Rural collectivisation, while expanding the national scope, paradoxically strengthens the rigid bureaucratic hierarchy and stifles the bottom-up accountability system at the village level (Gürel, 2022, pp. 26-42). During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), these tensions reached their peak, and formal administrative procedures were largely replaced by ideological turmoil. Although mass mobilisation has surged in the past decade, at the same time, the hollowing out of legal rational authority has left grassroots governance without a stable institutional foundation (He, 2020, pp. 148-162). This means that this stage represents the failure of socialist democracy in both theory and practice. The tense relationship between central control and public participation has been resolved in the face of opposition, resulting in weak governance and risks to legitimacy. Democratic centralism is being eroded; Mass mobilization has replaced institutionalised democracy, leading to the fragility of the system.

2.2.3 Reform and Opening Up Period (1978-2012)

Urban and rural contexts will not develop the same way during this evolution. The way rural governance has developed has been based on village committees and heavily influenced by kinship-based and lineage type networks (Wang, 2022; Xu & Yao, 2015). Urban governance, however, has developed around the creation of residents' committees, which began being created in 1954 as self-governing mass organizations of

the grass-roots level, but these operate as part of the bureaucratic hierarchy of the Chinese government (Audin & Throssell, 2015). As cities rapidly urbanise, the emergence of urban villages, and a higher level of professionalism in community service—especially with respect to those cities such as Guangzhou—the structure for how people participate at the grass-roots level has changed (Liu et al., 2009; Tang, 2015). As a result of these changes there is now a critical need to examine urban and rural communities in the same metropolitan area (Ngeow, 2010). By taking this comparative approach it is possible to identify variables, such as differences in stratification by socio-economic status, level of social connectivity within the community and level of administrative integration, which shape the way grassroots level democracy operates; therefore, examining at a national level is not enough and does not fully capture the difference in locality's governance practices (Wong et al., 2019; Zhu & Zhang, 2021).

2.2.4 Chinese-style Democratic Practice Period (2013-Now)

This period represents the theoretical and practical climax of China's democratic development trajectory: building a self-referential "Chinese-style democracy" with clear avoidance of competitive elections as its core mechanism. The concept of "whole process people's democracy" is the ultimate comprehensive framework, which believes that the essence of democracy is achieved through continuous, party-supervised consultation and effective policy implementation, rather than through a single voting act (Ren et al., 2024, pp. 10-17). However, studies have shown that issues such as uneven effectiveness, elite capture, and "lack of supervision" still exist (Yu, 2018; Zhu, 2015). The pursuit of "higher quality and greater efficiency" (Hu et al., 2023) is aimed at improving an authoritarian governance system that provides public goods and manages dissatisfaction without recognising political pluralism. In this sense, Chinese-style democracy is not a transitional stage towards liberal democracy, but rather a stable political framework for the current China.

2.3 Urban and Rural contexts Evolved and Differ

In this trajectory, the situation in urban and rural areas has undergone different changes. Rural governance has always been centered around village committees and has been greatly influenced by kinship networks and clan groups (Wang, 2022). In contrast, urban governance has developed around residents' committees, which were established in 1954 as grassroots autonomous mass organizations but operate within the bureaucratic hierarchy of the Chinese state (Audin&Thrassell, 2015). With rapid urbanization, the rise of urban villages, and the professionalization of community services, especially in cities such as Guangzhou, the structure of grassroots participation has undergone changes (Liu et al., 2009). This transformation urgently requires a systematic comparison between rural and urban communities within a single metropolitan area. This comparative method allows for the identification of specific background variables that affect the dynamics of grassroots democratic operations, such as socio-economic stratification, community cohesion, and administrative integration, thereby going beyond general national level analysis and capturing subtle differences in local governance practices (Zhu&Zhang, 2021).

3. Methods: A Comparative Analysis of Urban and Rural Grassroots Democracy

This study uses a comparative analysis framework to examine the operational modes of grassroots democracy in urban and rural areas in China and to explore how it

overcomes the limitations identified in existing research by reviewing its inherent differences in governance contexts, socioeconomic conditions, and organisational environments. To deepen our understanding of the distinctions within China's urban-rural grassroots democracy, the analysis examines five interrelated dimensions: a) election provisions, b) voter competence, c) levels of political participation, and d) autonomy content.

3.1 The Provisions for Elections

The election provisions are the core element of grassroots democracy, reflecting assessments of procedural design, implementation quality, and competitiveness. Within local elections, both rural and urban areas in China are governed by a formal legal framework that emphasises procedural norms and collective participation, while allowing different regions to adopt varying practices. The Organic Law on Village Committees (2015) outlines the principles of village committees, including democratic election, decision-making, management and supervision. It lists the relevant requirements for direct elections. It provides more detailed regulations on village committee elections, such as the qualifications of voters and candidates, election principles, direct election, the election and procedures of the village committee, the highest authority being the village committee, and the village representative meeting being the authorized deliberative body of the village committee, which shows the standardisation of elections and the further improvement of villagers' autonomy and selectivity. These regulations not only promote the standardisation of the election process but also expand villagers' formal participation in grassroots governance. Although the Villagers' Committee Election Law does not contain specific provisions for competitive elections, the Chinese government allows village organisations in various regions to experiment with and implement them. For instance, the innovative "combination election" of Tengyun Village Committee in Lianyun Township, Yuexi County, Anhui Province, China, involves a multi-step process (Xin, 2004, pp. 45-54). First, candidates are nominated for the village committee. Next, the village director candidate selects their own campaign team from all the nominated candidates, similar to forming a cabinet in the West. Then, a voter meeting is held where candidates deliver speeches and answer questions. This is followed by two rounds of voting: the first for the director through a differential election, and the second for the team nominated by the director. This method integrated nomination, team formation, and differential voting into a structured electoral process. Some scholars argue that this model reduced clan-based dominance, enhanced collective governance capacity, and introduced a controlled degree of electoral competition without undermining organisational stability. However, its complexity and regulatory ambiguity also highlight the institutional constraints facing grassroots electoral innovation.

The Organic Law on Urban Committees states that the principles of urban committees are self-management, self-education, self-service, and self-supervision, demonstrating that urban democracy emphasises resident autonomy. Various localities established the "Regulations on Direct Election of Community Residents Committees" in line with the "Organic Law of Urban Residents Committees of the People's Republic of China", which stipulated regulations for the direct elections of residents' committees, such as registration of resident qualifications, regulations on the responsibilities of resident meetings and resident representative meetings, direct election, candidates and so on. The community's direct elections and procedures are typically similar to those in rural areas. There are only minor differences in specific practices and implementation details.

For example, in 2003, Chenglang Community in Haishu District, Ningbo City, Zhejiang Province, established a direct election model of "separation of election and appointment" through institutional innovation, process standardisation, and continuous optimisation (Li, 2010, pp. 6-15). Community neighbourhood committee members are directly elected by residents, without remuneration, and represent public opinion; neighbourhood committee voters include permanent residents and migrant workers who have lived in the community for more than half a year. Candidates are determined through voluntary registration and joint support of 10 voters, and neighbourhood committee members are elected through public speeches, debates, and voting. Full-time social workers are employed by the neighbourhood committee, paid by the government, and undertake administrative affairs. This system draws on the American community board model to enhance the neighbourhood committee's autonomy and avoid dependence on the government. Mainly through government procurement of services, the socialisation function is transferred to the community social worker organisation, implementing the "separation of discussion and implementation". The neighbourhood committee emphasises autonomy, while social workers handle administrative duties, fostering healthy interaction, improving service efficiency, and increasing residents' participation in community affairs. It attracts social elites to join the neighbourhood committee, integrates resources, and promotes community development. This approach is known as the "Ningbo Model", which offers valuable experience advancing grassroots democratic development and governance (Li et al., 2009, pp. 95-99). Subsequent evaluations suggest that the model increased participation rates and improved governance efficiency, although its effectiveness depended on fiscal capacity, organisational coordination, and sustained policy support (Dai, 2018, pp. 74–79).

Table 1: The Elections in Rural and Urban areas

Comparison dimension	Rural: "Combination Election System" (Tengyun Village)	Urban: "Separation of Election and Appointment" Mode (Haishu District)
objective	To break the clan monopoly, optimise the governance team, and balance the democratic participation and governance efficiency.	To strengthen the autonomy of the neighbourhood committee, improve service efficiency, and promote resident participation.
machine-processed	Nomination-Combination-Election	Separation of selection and appointment
make innovations	1. Innovation in electoral mechanisms 2. Breaking the traditional power structure 3. Strengthening accountability linkage	1. Functional Separation Innovation 2. Open participation 3. Professional operation
Challenge	1. Complex procedures 2. Legal basis 3. Potential risks	1. Role Coordination. 2. Resource dependence 3. Community Mobilisation
common value	1. Problem-oriented 2. Deepening participation: 3. Pursuit of Efficiency 4. Technology empowerment	

Source: Organic Law on Village Committees and Urban Residents Committees

From the comparison of two cases in Table 1, involving rural and urban election provisions, rural elections show greater tolerance for procedural experimentation aimed at balancing participation and governance efficacy, whereas urban elections place greater emphasis on functional differentiation and specialisation in community governance. These differences reflect broader structural disparities in socioeconomic conditions, administrative integration, and governance objectives, highlighting the contextual nature of grassroots election practices in China.

3.2 Voter Competence

Voter competence refers to citizens' capacity to make informed, autonomous electoral choices, including political awareness, access to information, and the ability to participate. It has been shown that citizens who genuinely participate in voting are more capable than other voters because the intensity of political elites' pre-voting campaigns can profoundly affect the quality of voters' decisions (Bernhard et al., 2018, pp. 603-623; Goldberg et al., 2019). Voter capacity is shaped by institutional arrangements, campaign dynamics, and broader socioeconomic conditions rather than being regarded as an inherent attribute. The more intense the campaign, the more information they provide voters, improving their problem-solving abilities (Maduz, L., 2010, 1-14). In grassroots elections in China, urban and rural residents formally enjoy equal voting rights; however, the actual performance of voters' abilities varies significantly due to differences in geography and environment. As two examples previously mentioned, voters in urban and rural areas differ. In urban communities, the absence of a solid material or relational bond between residents and neighbourhood committees often diminishes their enthusiasm for participating in elections. Empirical research indicates that low voter turnout and difficulties in voter registration are relatively common, reflecting residents' perceived low relevance rather than a complete lack of civic responsibility. (Huang, 2018, pp. 13-27). In comparison, since rural governance directly affects resource allocation and welfare distribution, voters often demonstrate more proactive participation. Nevertheless, this interest-based approach may also distort voters' judgment by prioritising short-term material interests over broader governance factors. Existing studies on rural elections reveal the hidden risks of bribery and nepotism, indicating that interest-driven participation may undermine autonomous electoral choices (Wedeman, A., 2017, 107-129). Therefore, improving voters' competence is essential.

There are many problems in Chinese society, such as the urban-rural divide, the rich-poor divide, and the education gap. These structural issues profoundly affect voters' ability, especially in rural areas, to evaluate candidates and policies independently. In rural areas, voters may face challenges such as low levels of education, limited access to information, and limited opportunities for social participation, which can hinder their effective participation in elections and their ability to make informed choices. Whether they can obtain benefits is decisive in their electoral behaviour (Kennedy, 2002, pp. 456-482). In urban communities, the tendency of the neighbourhood committee administration is highlighted as a lack of authority, which causes residents to have no interest in community self-government (Zhang et al., 2010, pp. 59-63).

The comparison in Table 2 shows that voters' ability in grassroots democracy in China is not an inherent attribute but rather shaped by institutional arrangements, campaign dynamics, and socio-economic structures. Therefore, the key to enhancing voters' ability lies in institutional optimisation: in rural areas, it is necessary to transform interest

concerns into rational governance choices through procedural innovation and transparent supervision; in urban areas, it is necessary to reconstruct the substantive relevance between community identity and elections through functional separation and public service empowerment.

Table 2: Voter Competence in Rural and Urban areas

Comparison dimension	Voter Capacity in Rural Grassroots Election	Voter Capacity in Urban Grassroots Election
primary motivation	profit driven	Relationship/identity-driven (weak)
Information Environment and Access	1. Relatively limited information channels 2. Campaigns can effectively enhance voter capacity	1. More extensive and diversified information channels 2. Low participation willingness
Performance capability	1. Addressing specific, short-term issues 2. Subjective judgment is prone to distortion	1. Low efficacy in political cognition and civic awareness 2. Low willingness to participate
Challenges and Risks	1. Structural limitations exist 2. Election Integrity Risk	1. Structural alienation exists 2. Low willingness to participate

Source: Organic Law on Village Committees and Urban Residents Committees

3.3 The Levels of Political Participation

Research on many countries and China has indicated that to assess the extent of political participation, it is necessary to examine both formal (elections, hearings, budget meetings, electronic platforms) and informal (community initiatives, volunteer networks) channels through which citizens engage in grassroots governance, and to analyse their levels of participation and motivations (Affre et al., 2024; Nahidul et al., 2025). And some studies have shown that institutional design, coupled with sustained and effective citizen participation, is a key factor in the modernisation of grassroots governance (Bussu et al., 2022, pp. 133-145). It is clear that this is a common problem at the level of participation.

From a structural perspective, in China's urban and rural grassroots, the direct correlation between participants and the organisation's economic relationship determines the degree of participation (Olivares, 2012). From the table presented in Table 3, there is an indication that there are two different forms of grassroots democracy. The basis of the analysis of grassroots democracy will rely on six general features that will point out distinctions in each form of grassroots democracy in relation to Overall Condition, Structural Basis, Factors Influencing Motivation, Participation Mechanisms, Nature of Participation, and Trends in Change. The common financial foundation of villagers' autonomy, the close correlation between villagers' interests and the village committee, and the close relationship between villagers and their neighbours together determine the high level of villagers' participation. In addition, women have higher participation than men in rural areas because most men have gone to work in cities. Conversely, residents lack a shared economic basis, have no interest overlap, and maintain loose neighbourhood relationships, resulting in low resident participation. Meanwhile, city workers are more involved than urban residents (Sun, 2010, p. 23).

Furthermore, Research based on surveys has shown differences in motivational structures between rural and urban participants. Scholar Tzeng (2020, p. 87) argues that village committees can stimulate villagers' enthusiasm for voting compared with residents' committees. His other survey results indicate that it is their party membership, rather than democratic consciousness, that determines villagers' participation in elections. On the contrary, it is democratic consciousness rather than party membership that determines urban residents' participation in elections. There are still many constraints on citizens' political participation, including an imperfect political participation system, backward economic development, and a lag in proactive and participatory political culture (Wang, 2012, pp. 5319–5323).

Table 3: Levels of Political Participation in Rural and Urban areas

Comparison dimension	Participation in Rural Grassroots Democratic Politics	Participation in Democratic Politics in Urban Grassroots
overall participation	Generally high	Generally low
structural base	1. Strong economic linkages. 2. High degree of interest overlap 3. Close social relationships	1. Lack of a common economic foundation. 2. Low overlap between personal interests and community affairs. 3. Distant Neighbourhood Relations
Driving factors	1. Interest alignment as the primary driver 2. Organizational mobilization as a key factor 3. Higher female participation rate	1. Civic responsibility as the primary driver 2. Community affairs as a secondary driver 3. Group Differences
Participating Channels	1. Primarily through formal channels 2. Strong channel and benefit correlation	1. Diverse forms but low efficacy 2. Overall participation in informal channels remains low
Participatory quality	A high participation rate may include "mobilisation participation"	Low Participation Rate but May Contain "Autonomous Participation"
Trends and New Forms of Evolution	From the past mobilisation to more institutionalised and procedural participation	1. Transition from Mobilisation Participation to Institutionalised and Diversified Participation 2. Emerging online opinion leaders become an important new carrier of political participation.

Source: Affre et al., 2024; Nahidul et al., 2025

The current Chinese political participation is an essential part of the democratic system. In modern China, Chinese citizens' political participation has evolved from mobilisation-type activities to government-led participation in the 2000s, and now includes online network opinion leaders, a more democratic political reform process, and the institutionalisation of citizens' political participation. The online network opinion leader is a new form of political participation, which will become a primary method for future generations in the intelligent era (Chen et al., 2022). It has been suggested that in recent

decades, China's political participation has shifted from a mobilisation-oriented approach to a more institutionalised and diversified form.

3.4 The Content of Autonomy

The content of autonomy refers to determining the scope of decision-making authority exercised by grassroots organisations in managing public affairs. This dimension does not merely focus on the electoral process, but examines what grassroots actors are authorised to decide, manage, and supervise in practice. According to the rules of democracy, the basic logic of grassroots democracy is to let people solve their problems and resolve their contradictions at the grassroots level. Allowing and encouraging local explorations and breakthroughs should become the primary strategies for developing grassroots democracy in China (Zhao, 2017, pp. 185-191). Since the reform and opening up, the Chinese government has been striving to build grassroots democracy and has achieved tangible results. According to the two Organic laws, villagers' self-government centres on their autonomy, exemplified by the core institutional framework of the "four democracies" (namely, democratic elections, decision-making, management, and supervision).

In practice, villager self-governance is built around the institutional framework commonly referred to as the "four democracies": democratic election, democratic decision-making, democratic management, and democratic supervision. Various models of villagers' self-governance have emerged: "Hebei's Qingxian Model" features a three-part structure of 'Party branch leadership, villagers' representative meetings for decision-making, and village committee affairs'; Zhejiang's 'Wenling Model' emphasises participatory decision-making with democratic consultation meetings as the core; Guangdong's 'Jiaoling Model' innovatively creates a village affairs supervisory committee, establishing a 'three-power separation' check-and-balance system (Yang et al., 2010, pp. 49-53).

Urban community autonomy is primarily realised through the 'Residents' Committee Organisation Law, ' with the community serving as the foundation and employing organisational structures like residents' and owners' committees. Its key components include a democratic election process in which residents or their representatives elect committee members, a collaborative governance approach that combines efforts from property companies and community social organisations, and digital governance that leverages smart platforms to enhance service responsiveness. As noted in previous cases, China's governance has advanced grassroots democracy in urban and rural areas by developing and innovating forms of autonomy that vary in content. Rural practice suggests that shared economic benefits can encourage greater political participation, but it may also foster a sense of alienation from autonomy stemming from shared economic interests. Therefore, we should adopt innovative mechanisms from urban grassroots democratic practices and enhance the supervision of legal and standardised frameworks (Deng, 2018, p. 9).

Table 4 demonstrates that grassroots democracy in China is shaped by legal design, economic structure, and local institutional innovation. Its effectiveness depends not only on the scope of formal power but also on the exercise of autonomy, the methods of supervision, and the integration of formal power into broader governance arrangements.

Table 4: Content of Autonomy in Rural and Urban areas

Comparison dimension	Content of rural grassroots democracy and self-governance	Content of Urban Grassroots Democracy and Autonomy
statutory core framework	The four democracies: democratic election, democratic decision-making, democratic management and democratic supervision.	The legal definition is self-management, self-education, self-service and self-supervision.
Typical Practice	1. The "Three Powers Collaboration" Framework of Hebei Qingxian Model. 2. The "Democratic Consultation Meeting" Model of Wenling, Zhejiang Province 3. The "Three Powers Separation" System of the Guangdong Jiaoling Model	1. Governance approach: collaborative governance 2. Innovative Tools: Digital Governance
The Essence of Autonomy	strong interest linkage drive	Service Orientation under Weak Interest Linkage
Major Challenges	1. Prone to generating conflicts of interest 2. Learn from urban experiences to strengthen rule-of-law and standardized supervision	1. Limited autonomous space 2. Insufficient sense of autonomy

Source: Zhao, 2017, pp. 185-191; Yang et al., 2010, pp. 49-53

4. Discussion: Improving China's Grassroots Democracy

After a comparative analysis of urban and rural grassroots in the Chinese context, based on the theoretical framework of grassroots democracy, this section attempts to propose suggestions for enhancing grassroots democracy in China from seven aspects: institutional autonomy, electoral system, citizen participation, accountability and regulatory mechanisms, civil society development, international cooperation and exchange, and embracing technological innovation

4.1 Institutional Autonomy

Enhancing grassroots democratic autonomy requires far more than formal decentralisation measures; it relies on the practical delegation of substantive decision-making power, fiscal autonomy, and procedural space guaranteed by law. Previous research has shown that the effectiveness of grassroots democracy in China varies significantly between urban and rural contexts, primarily due to differences in institutional autonomy. Experimental studies have shown that empowerment (including decentralisation and participatory institutions) is significantly positively correlated with the effectiveness of local governance (Rosilawati et al., 2021). Democracy is not merely an ideal societal state or political value; it is equally essential as the fundamental safeguard of social harmony (Zhao, 2017, pp. 185-191). The Chinese government has advanced autonomy through a comprehensive approach that involves institutional innovation, multi-stakeholder participation, legal protection, and technological empowerment across various districts, achieving the expected results. In Huangmaoling Township, Yuanyang County, Yunnan, the governance capacity has been improved by

optimising the selection mechanism of grassroots cadres (Yunnan Net, 2025). In Huangtian Township, She County, Anhui, by establishing a normalised platform for many things, civil direct decision-making has been ensured (Yin, 2025), and in Yanshan County, Yunnan, the transparency of decision-making has been enhanced to ensure the effectiveness of supervision (Xu, 2025).

4.2 Electoral Institutions

Grassroots democracy elections are a core element of China's democratic endeavours, yet their progress remains uneven. Given the issues with grassroots elections, such as a lack of focus on key aspects of the process and insufficient competition, it indicates that China has yet to develop institutionalised, standardised, and procedural grassroots election systems. Looking at how grassroots elections really work, it would be necessary to have an optimal, standardised, election system. As indicated earlier, whole-process people's democracy appears to reconcile arguments for and against classical democracy, as represented by Rousseau (2018), and Modern democracy, as represented by Schumpeter (1976). The former emphasises people's direct participation, and the latter emphasises democracy as a means of engaging citizens.

Evidence shows that although "plurality elections" and "multi-candidate competitions" are being rolled out across various regions, these forms of competition are being manipulated (Su et al., 2011, pp. 432-457). Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to several key issues, such as the problem of candidates being party members - electors are more likely to vote for non-party candidates, the problem of choosing a candidate with rich management experience who can represent the interests of the majority, the problem of whether the electors are satisfied with the electoral process, and the problem of the influence of the number of clans on the rural electoral process (Kennedy, J., 2002, pp. 456-482). Improving these institutional dimensions will enhance the legitimacy and operational efficiency of grassroots elections.

4.3 Citizen Participation

Political participation is an important way for grassroots democracy to play its role effectively. Huntington (1973, pp. 3-7) emphasised that broadening political participation is crucial to the transition from traditional to modern societies. Expanding opportunities for citizens to engage in decision-making processes can be achieved through public hearings, town hall meetings, and online platforms that invite public input on policies and initiatives. It is vital to ensure that citizens have access to reliable information and that their voices are genuinely incorporated into decision-making processes.

In recent years, China's grassroots democracy has made significant progress in both urban and rural areas, offering enhanced opportunities for citizen engagement through institutional innovations. Key approaches include grassroots consultation, deliberation platforms, and village self-governance models. For instance, Jing'an District in Shanghai has addressed the issue of unorganised parking in older residential neighbourhoods by launching the "Beautiful Linfen Discussion Hall," a consultation mechanism that facilitates community dialogue. The platform operates through a multi-tiered consultation framework encompassing the "Community Representative Conference," "Comprehensive Grid Party Building Joint Conference," "Block Committee Discussion Council," "Residential Area Joint Conference," and "Building Group Discussion Council."

Residents can present their concerns and suggestions through the "Beautiful Linfen Online People's Congress Representative House," with the process guided by the "Six-Step Working Method." This method includes identifying issues with precision, conducting broad discussions, analysing details thoroughly, facilitating convenient research, promoting equal participation, and ensuring practical implementation. Furthermore, blockchain technology has been utilised to enhance parking management in the community, yielding tangible benefits (Shanghai Jing'an District People's Government, 2025).

4.4 Accountability and Supervision Mechanisms

In democratic governance, it is widely believed that autonomy and participation alone are insufficient and must be complemented by robust accountability mechanisms. The three elements complement each other rather than replace one another. Autonomy with only decentralisation and a lack of accountability poses the risk of "unrestrained autonomy" (Kallio et al., 2021). In the practice of grassroots democratic governance, social participation can enhance policy quality, but it can also create ambiguity about "who is responsible to whom". Therefore, it is necessary to design accountability rules for input (participant representativeness), process (open and fair deliberation), and output (explicable results and accountability) to maintain institutional legitimacy (Triantafyllou et al., 2021, pp. 655-663). For example, in 2017, four prominent leaders, including the former Party branch secretary of Haojiajing Village, Xuecun Town, Liulin County, Shanxi Province, misused their authority during an enterprise land acquisition to pursue personal benefits and embezzle collective resources. Following the accountability actions, law enforcement investigated these individuals. This has encouraged village cadres to uphold their rights legally and has enhanced transparency in managing the village's collective assets (Online Party School, 2023). The operation of accountability mechanisms has strengthened grassroots democracy in both urban and rural areas and protected voters' rights and interests.

4.5 Civil Society Development

Civil society is often regarded as the foundation of democratic governance, accountability, and community development. Studies have generally shown that to "encourage the development of civil society," both a favourable environment and specific support tools for organisations and citizens are needed (McCord et al., 2020, p. 16). Assist in the creation of civil society organisations that are legally recognised and have defined areas of operation, which could help to mediate. Such organisations must have the legal standing to represent the public's concerns and monitor government activities within permissible legal frameworks (Jung et al., 2023). This method aligns with constitutional provisions and enables a bottom-up democracy. In addition, initiatives aimed at combating corruption must be prioritised by strengthening local governance transparency and proactively fighting corruption. Several actions must be taken immediately, including establishing independent monitoring institutions, ensuring open access to data, and strictly enforcing anti-corruption legislation. All these efforts are critical to foster public confidence and strengthen the integrity of democratic governance.

4.6 International Cooperation and Exchange

To promote the development of grassroots democracy and improve governance effectiveness, more and more countries have explored and developed a wide variety of practical models and theoretical frameworks (Qin, 2023, pp. 1-9). Despite differences in institutional systems, the same approach promotes international collaboration and the exchange of best practices in grassroots democracy, draws lessons from other nations' experiences, and engages in dialogue and partnerships to enhance democratic practices (Gaventa, 2004, pp. 16-27). As mentioned in the case above, the Democratic Consultation Meeting in Wenling, Zhejiang Province, has borrowed the model of the 21st Century Town Meeting from the United States, emphasising direct civic participation (Bao et al., 2017, pp. 6-11). The internationally accepted "democratic template" encompasses elements such as elections, political parties, the rule of law, local governance, and civil society. However, its practical effectiveness largely depends on local contexts and learning processes, rather than on being a mere toolkit to be copied directly.

4.7 Embrace Technological Innovations

Deepening technology empowerment and utilising technological progress to improve citizen engagement and government openness (Asimakopoulou et al., 2025). Explore using digital platforms, mobile applications, and social media to facilitate communication between citizens and authorities, enable online voting, and provide access to information. For example, citizens can access the government's draft budget in real time via digital platforms, submit online suggestions, and participate in consultations. By 2024, over 2,100 suggestions had been received, with 37% incorporated into budget adjustments, resulting in a 4.2% increase in education spending and a 3.8% rise in medical expenditure (Chen et al., 2025, p.185).

Nevertheless, due to limited operational skills with equipment among vulnerable groups, there is a digital divide, as well as concerns about security, privacy, and misinformation (Asimakopoulou et al., 2025). This formal inequality caused by the digital divide must be addressed, and digital inclusivity, security, and privacy protection must be promoted, alongside institutional and platform design centred on "participation and accountability".

5. Conclusion

Reviewing the historical evolution of grassroots democracy in China demonstrates that it has experienced a historic process of adaptive evolution from revolutionary mobilisation to institutionalised governance, developing Chinese characteristics, rather than following the Western classical model of liberal democracy. Under the leadership of the CPC, it is prioritised in governance, reflecting its instrumentality. The Chinese political system has demonstrated stability and resilience, grounded in joint local governance, where localities are governed not only by governments but also by market forces and self-governing organisations (He, 2003, pp. 293-314). As mentioned earlier, grassroots democracy is essential to social modernisation, with direct democracy and direct participation as fundamental aspects. As China's economy and society develop, people's democratic consciousness continues to grow, and expectations for political participation increase. Grassroots inhabitants are the primary witnesses to grassroots social life. They are not only the objects of grassroots democracy and governance but

should also be the main participants (Yao et al., 2021, pp. 40-44). In practice, diverse social interests are absorbed into institutional channels for coordination, preventing disorderly political expression. Its practice demonstrates the ongoing tension between "procedural participation" and "substantive empowerment" (Heberer, 2008, p.156; O'Brien et al., 2009, pp. 359-378). Therefore, from a political science perspective, observing this political system should not be approached solely through the lens of "democracy-authoritarianism" (Teorell et al., 2019, pp. 66-84). Instead, it should focus on a more constructive dynamic equilibrium among the Party leadership, legal rules, social participation, and governance effectiveness.

This study has devoted a significant amount of space to comparing the operational patterns of grassroots democracy in urban and rural areas of China. Within the national governance framework under the unified leadership of the CPC, differences in the governance environment, socio-economic foundation, and organisational ecology have led the two to develop practice patterns with distinct characteristics and complementary functions. The "differentiated democratic governance model" proposed by Bua et al. (2020) and Torres et al. (2024) provides a powerful explanatory framework for this, distinguishing between two governance logics: "governance-driven democratisation" and "democracy-driven governance". The former is initiated by bureaucrats with the goal of improving policy quality and resolving legitimacy crises, and participating in more functional improvements; The latter originates from social movements and citizen mobilization, by "reclaiming" and "transforming" existing participation spaces, advancing governance structures towards social justice and expanding rights, coexisting and interacting within the same system, forming a differentiated "governance democracy" pattern: some issues and fields tend to be instrumental and technical in participation, while others are "repoliticized" by movement force. Future research should be conducted more in-depth comparative political research grounded in local experience, developing analytical concepts and theories that explain such complex governance phenomena, and examining the substantial expansion of public participation and the effectiveness of supervision in the institutionalisation of grassroots democracy in urban and rural areas of China.

The development of grassroots democracy in China in the future should not be seen as a repair of a single system, but as a systematic governance project. Under the existing political system, based on the logical framework of local governance needs, integrated institutional empowerment, technology-driven and social cultivation, the practice of grassroots democracy in urban and rural areas should be transformed from "formal coverage" to "efficiency improvement".

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The researchers used the research ethics provided by the Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (RECUKM). All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants according to the Declaration of Helsinki.

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Conflict of Interest

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