The classical concept of political participation says that the political behavior of citizens, using various methods, either directly or indirectly influences government’s decisions or public political life relevant to government activities. Actors in the political participation process are usually individual citizens, and the political participation activities generally engaged in by citizens include voting, elections, initiating contacts and forming associations. Of these activities, only forming associations possesses qualities of a group activity, while the other activities are highly individual. Clearly, some group activities, such as the activities of interest groups, are not the subject of studies on political participation. More importantly, political participation is legitimate political behavior within an institutional framework, and the goal of such behavior is solely to influence the government’s decisions or government-related activities.

The conditions of political development in China suggest that it cannot simply borrow a concept of political participation taken out of a Western context. China has its own actors and behavioral patterns, and the goals of political participation in China also possess “Chinese characteristics” (besides activities that influence the government, there are also many “rights protection” (wei quan 维权) activities). To begin with, electoral politics is not the most common political activity in China’s political process. The indirect election system does not allow common citizens to participate in the making of personnel arrangements for middle or high level governments, and the direct election system for administrative units at or below the county level still needs much improvement. It is, thus, difficult for common citizens to use elections to give voice to their interests, complaints or demands. Moreover, the level of the rule of law in China is not high and some systems are arranged irrationally. Many conflicts of interest cannot be resolved in a timely, effective manner under the current system, compelling people...
to adopt extralegal or non-institutional measures to protect their own rights and interests. Lastly, China’s government system is shaped like a pyramid consisting of five levels of governments (central-provincial-city-county-township), with the “cadre appointments system” serving as the mainstay of political unity. Under this system, many conflicts of interest at county or township level, as well as disputes between villagers and government at the grassroots level cannot be effectively resolved. Therefore, people sometimes have to resort to non-systemic behavior to give expression to their interests.

Given the particular context, existing concepts of “political participation” cannot be arbitrarily applied to an analysis of China’s political development and political process. A concept of “citizen participation” is more suitable for such purposes. The actors in the citizen participation process include not only individual citizens, but also informal groups of people, civic associations and emerging public groups like “netizens.” Citizen participation activities include not only behaviors to influence public authorities, but also activities to protect one’s own rights and interests when these are infringed upon by public authorities. Some activities are actually just a matter of people giving vent to their frustrations with the society. Therefore, the concept of citizen participation is more extensive than the concept of political participation. Nevertheless, the present essay may use these two concepts interchangeably in different contexts.

The reforms and opening which began in 1978 have separated the short history of the People’s Republic of China into two distinct periods. The reforms have lead to a profound transformation of China’s social structure, generating a shift from ideological politics to interest politics. To adapt to this political transformation, the government’s value orientation and behavior patterns have also undergone a significant transformation. All these factors have contributed to the development of citizen participation. Other countries have also experienced such political and economic relationships during national construction. Interestingly, this sort of modernization theory, which developed on the basis of previous historical experience and was popular during the 1960’s and 1970’s, has encountered the kind of technological

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