



# Review of Participatory Budgeting Practices in China

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## Abstract

*This paper examines the development, implementation and challenges of participatory budgeting (PB) in various cities in China, including Beijing, Jiaozuo, Shenzhen and others. It explores the diverse origins, sustainability, depth, and breadth of citizen engagement in PB initiatives, as well as institutional and political factors influencing their effectiveness. The study highlights key challenges such as transparency and institutionalization of PB and its integration into existing governance structures. It also discusses the role of digital technologies in enhancing participatory processes, improving fiscal transparency and broadening citizen involvement. The paper concludes with a discussion on the future of PB in China, emphasizing the need for policy reforms, digital innovations and international comparative research to ensure its long-term viability and impact on public governance.*

**Keywords:** *participatory budgeting in China, public finance, citizen engagement, digital governance, public participation*

**JEL:** H61, H83, P35

**For citation:** Ming Zhuang (2025). Review of Participatory Budgeting Practices in China. *Financial Journal*, 17 (2), 72–81. <https://doi.org/10.31107/2075-1990-2025-2-72-81>.

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## INTRODUCTION

Participatory budgeting (PB) is a democratic model of governance that involves the direct participation of citizens in the public budget decision-making process. It has been gradually recognized and promoted worldwide. This participatory model emphasizes interaction and cooperation between government and citizens, aiming to enhance transparency and efficiency of resource allocation, while also strengthening the government's sense of responsibility and accountability. Over the past decades, PB has taken root in various municipalities and regions, becoming an important tool for promoting social justice and democratizing public services.

With the rapid development of China's economy and profound changes in its social structure, public attention to government activities, especially in the allocation of public resources and social governance, has increased. As the Chinese government seeks to improve the quality of public services and meet the increasing demands of the people for a better life, it has recognized the importance of PB. The introduction of the latter can not only enhance fiscal transparency and efficiency, but also promote social equity and justice, effectively respond to public demands and enhance the acceptance and effectiveness of policies.

## **DEVELOPMENT OF PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING IN CHINA**

Since the beginning of the 21st century, China has begun to explore PB at the local government level, where a series of pilot projects have been initiated. From early attempts in Wenling, Zhejiang, to the continuous practices in Beijing, Shanghai's Minhang District, and Chengdu, China's PB has shown a diversified development trend. These regions have involved the public in budget decision-making through budget hearings, democratic dialogue and consultation, as well as digital platforms for collecting opinions, allowing citizens to participate directly.

Chinese explorations in PB have mainly focused on raising citizens' awareness of participation and promoting the openness and transparency of budget formulation and execution. For instance, Wenling City and its subordinate Xinhe Town in Zhejiang Province have introduced public participation in local fiscal budgeting, breathing new life into the local People's Congress and introducing democratic supervision mechanisms [He, Warren, 2011]. These practices indicate that PB in China, although still in the pilot phase, has made positive progress in making public budgets more transparent and democratic. However, this reform also faces challenges and limitations, such as the composition of local People's Congresses that may limit their representativeness, and issues in the implementation process that require further improvement and refinement.

Overall, Chinese PB has its own characteristics, and its development in China is a gradual process that requires continuous exploration and improvement to adapt to national conditions and local realities, thus further modernizing and democratizing fiscal management. Through such reform attempts, China hopes to achieve greater success in PB in the future, contributing to the goal of good governance.

### **Participatory Budgeting in Wenling, Zhejiang**

The example of PB in Wenling City in Zhejiang is a model that demonstrates the grassroots innovation in democratic governance. Since 1999, Wenling City has been exploring forms of public participation in the management of public affairs, gradually developing into three stages: dialogue, decision-making, and democratic PB consultations [Cai, 2009]. The latter have attracted widespread attention from all sectors of society due to their innovativeness and effectiveness. The democratic consultations in Wenling originated from the agricultural and rural modernization education forum aiming to change the traditional one-way education model and adopt a forum format that allows the public to participate voluntarily and speak freely. This characteristic of voluntary participation and direct peer-to-peer dialogue in democratic consultations has been maintained to this day and spread throughout the city. Over time, democratic consultations in Wenling have gradually covered decision-making consultations, budget consultations, wage consultations etc., forming a grassroots consultative democratic system. Especially in budget consultations, the Standing Committee of the People's Congress of Wenling City has organically combined democratic consultations with the system of the People's Congress, using the form of democratic consultations to carry out budget supervision by the People's Congress, and achieved good results.

In terms of PB practice, Wenling City has adopted various methods, such as democratic consultations on departmental budgets, selecting key departmental budgets for democratic consultations, allowing representatives to fully solicit opinions from constituents, and providing a basis for the People's Congress to review and vote. In addition, since 2005, Wenling City has introduced a form of democratic consultations into the process of formulating, reviewing and controlling government budgets, forming a locally characteristic PB model. PB in Wenling demonstrates a new model of grassroots democratic governance, allowing the public to participate in government budget decision-making through democratic consultations, which not only enhances transparency and public participation in budget decision-making but also improves the quality and efficiency of government decision-making.

**Participatory Budgeting in Chengdu, Sichuan**

In 2009, to further improve the rural public and social governance, enhance public services and social management, and bridge the gap in basic public services between urban and rural areas, the Chengdu Municipal Government initiated reforms in the public services sector, exploring the possibility of decentralizing fiscal decision-making power to rural areas, allowing villagers to make decisions on public service projects at the village level [Cabannes, Zhuang, 2014]. This policy was fully implemented in rural areas and expanded to urban communities in 2012. In 2016, the Chengdu Urban and Rural Community Development Governance Committee was established to coordinate rural and urban participatory budget policies, and the Chengdu Urban and Rural Community Development Governance Special Guarantee Fund (hereinafter referred to as the “Community Guarantee Fund”) was introduced. This special fund is allocated at the beginning of the year by district (city) financial authorities for urban and rural communities, earmarked for community public services and community development governance projects.

Against this backdrop, Chengdu’s special fund implementation introduced PB and integrated digital technology applications to assist PB, combined with the Community Public Budget Platform for online public opinion gathering, voting, monitoring, evaluating, to increase citizen participation in public fiscal decision-making, enhancing the efficiency and fairness of social management, ensure more transparency and less corruption and reduce residents’ complaints against local governments. This approach not only helps to improve the performance of grassroots budget funds but also is expected to further develop Chengdu’s achievements in social justice and transparency. By 2024, the policy has covered more than 3,300 rural and urban settlements and 21 million residents, with an annual budget exceeding USD 2.4 billion, involving 7 million residents in the complete budget process of around 30,000 grassroots public service projects each year.

**Participatory Budgeting in Harbin, Heilongjiang**

Harbin’s PB reform started in 2006. Since then, Harbin has actively promoted it, gradually expanding from the initial 2 districts, 5 projects, and funds of over RMB 4 million to 311 projects and funds of RMB 2.1 billion (USD 29 million) in 2009 at the municipal level and in 18 districts and counties [Chen, You, 2012]. The practical experience of Harbin, as one of the pioneers of PB reform in China, is of significant importance for the democratization and development of budget management in the country. Harbin’s PB reform has always adhered to the government’s leadership, closely integrating the reform with key tasks such as the renovation of old urban areas and community construction. Selecting projects that are closely related to people’s lives ensures that limited fiscal funds are invested in public construction projects most needed by the masses, and achieves an effective match between government decision-making and the needs of the masses.

At the same time, the forms of participation in Harbin are flexible and diverse. The forms of determining PB projects in Harbin have evolved from a single mass representative assembly to various forms such as consultation meetings, demonstration meetings, hearings and seminars. These flexible and diverse participation forms not only improve the convenience and breadth of mass participation but also provide a fuller and deeper base of public opinion for government decision-making. Harbin has established a system of supervision and inquiry of public representatives under the PB reform, which enables it to timely listen to the public’s opinions and suggestions on project quality, organize public representatives to inspect the implementation of projects, and conduct on-site inspection and supervision. This control mechanism effectively ensures the quality of projects and enhances the transparency and credibility of PB reform.

The PB reform in Harbin has not only improved the public's travel conditions and living environment, but more importantly, enabled the public to directly participate in government fund budgeting and supervision and acceptance of construction projects, achieving significant economic and social benefits, realizing the goal of government spending and public satisfaction. This experience has important implications and references for PB reform in other cities.

### **Participatory Budgeting in Wuxi, Jiangsu**

The practice of PB in Wuxi, Jiangsu, began in 2006, making it one of the first cities in China to undertake such an initiative [Zhang, Wu, 2009]. The PB reform in Wuxi adheres to the principle of “government unified leadership, extensive public participation”, aiming to determine public welfare projects affecting the interests of the public through open discussion and democratic voting. In the budgeting process, the government actively guides public participation, allowing citizens to directly participate in deciding public welfare projects that affect their interests. This model effectively enhances the transparency and democracy of budgeting process, strengthening the interaction and trust between the government and the public.

Additionally, PB practices in Wuxi emphasize innovative use of fiscal funds. For instance, Yicheng Street in Yixing City has innovatively adopted PB methods to transform government functions and increase public participation in government decision-making. Through this approach, the use of fiscal funds pays more attention to the real needs of the public, shifting from the “government meals” model to the “people's orders” model which optimizes the allocation of public financial resources.

### **Participatory Budgeting in Beijing**

As the capital of China, Beijing has also demonstrated a proactive stance in advancing PB. It has accumulated rich experience and outcomes in the field of PB and participatory planning, forming a locally characteristic “Beijing model” [Zhang, Zhao, 2015]. In 2011, Maizidian Street in Beijing's Chaoyang District hosted consultations on the civil construction fund project, which was a new attempt of Chinese PB. In this model, decision-making power for budget projects is handed over to community residents, meaning that residents decide what to do and how much to spend. On Qinghe Street in Haidian District, the government actively collects residents' opinions on community development and budget allocation through community group discussions and other means.

Such discussions and consultations not only provide residents with a platform to express their needs and suggestions but also offer important references for government decision-making. For example, in the “New Qinghe Experiment,” the community planning team understood residents' needs in public space transformation, parking management, environmental sanitation, etc. through in-depth exchanges and discussions with residents, and translated these needs into specific budget projects. Beijing's refined budget management is reflected in the cost-benefit analysis and performance assessment of each project. By establishing a full-cost budget performance management model, Beijing can evaluate the necessity, feasibility, efficiency, and benefits of projects at the budgeting stage, thereby optimizing the budget expenditure structure and input costs of projects.

Beijing's experience in PB shows that collecting resident opinions through community group discussion, combined with refined management and regional pilot strategies, can effectively address the issues of large populations and complex coordination of interests. This experience not only improves the competence and accuracy of budgeting but also enhances residents' sense of participation and satisfaction, providing valuable guidance for other cities.

**Participatory Budgeting in Jiaozuo, Henan**

In 2004, Jiaozuo, Henan Province, established a participatory democratic decision-making mechanism based on integrated budgeting, which made full use of the People's Congress system platform, providing the public the "right to know," "right to participate," and "right to supervise" [Li, 2007]. The establishment of this mechanism allows the public to directly participate in the budget decision-making process, enhancing transparency of and public satisfaction with budgeting. Jiaozuo introduced public choice procedures, innovative, scientifically developed participation methods and approaches in the budgeting process, and enhanced budget transparency by publicly disclosing the budgeting framework, resource distribution and quota standards, gradually expanding the public's right to know and participate in budgeting, achieving open and transparent financial management and effective democratic decision-making. Through project publicity, public opinion testing, public hearings and People's Congress inquiries, the masses have fully participated in the budgeting of public funds and the project construction process, ensuring the rights of the masses and bringing the government closer to the people.

PB, as a process of accepting the participation of representatives and citizens in decision-making, helps improve government work and increase the efficiency of budget utilization. At the same time, Jiaozuo City actively strengthens the budget oversight function of the People's Congress, adding its preliminary review to the PB process, introducing a new model of the People's Congress review and supervision of budgeting.

Jiaozuo's experience in PB indicates that by establishing a public participation mechanism, implementing power checks and balances, promoting detailed budget forms and introducing performance management can effectively improve transparency, fairness, and efficiency of budget expenditures, promoting social equity and justice and strengthening government credibility and governance capacity. These experiences are of significant reference value for promoting public finance reform in other regions of China.

**Micro-projects for Livelihoods in Shenzhen**

From the end of 2015 to the end of 2022, Shenzhen implemented about 80,000 so called livelihood micro-projects, with a total fiscal investment of about RMB 8 billion<sup>1</sup>. This model, based on the concept of "the masses order, the government serves," widely collects resident needs through online and offline channels, ensuring that projects are closely matched with the real needs of community residents. The results of project reviews are publicly displayed on community bulletin boards and online platforms, ensuring transparency and the public's right to be informed. Additionally, neighborhood committees, as one of the executive bodies, effectively enhance the autonomous functions of grassroots public autonomous organizations through this platform, strengthening residents' sense of participation and fulfillment.

The special feature of Shenzhen's "livelihood micro-projects" is not only in the extensive community coverage and efficient fund usage, but also in the continuous optimization and innovation. The government improves the demand mechanism, enhances project quality, optimizes implementation processes and standardizes fund management, making "livelihood micro-projects" more accurate and efficient, and better serving community residents through improving service quality, promoting community integration and enhancing grassroots governance capabilities. This makes Shenzhen an effective model and valuable PB example for other cities.

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<sup>1</sup> Shenzhen Municipal Government (2023). *Annual Report on the Implementation of Livelihood Micro-projects in Shenzhen*. Available at: [https://mzj.sz.gov.cn/szmqz/pc/xwzx/mzyw/content/post\\_8146066.html](https://mzj.sz.gov.cn/szmqz/pc/xwzx/mzyw/content/post_8146066.html).

**ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION:  
COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS, CHALLENGES AND DIGITIZATION****Original Incentive and Sustainability**

Local PB in China has different origins and motivations, resulting in varying degrees of sustainability. PB in places like Harbin, Wuxi, and Jiaozuo began under the collaborative promotion of domestic and international institutions such as the Development Research Center of the State Council and the World Bank, which initiated pilot work on PB [Li, Wang, 2010]. Such project-driven PB lacks endogenous demand and motivation, and to varying degrees, sustainability issues arise after the pilot projects are completed. In Wenling, PB is closely linked to its promotion by academics, social activists, and local government officials and is deeply integrated into the local democratic governance and the local People's Congress system innovation. However, when these promoters leave and local government officials change, there is a risk that the system stagnates; yet recently, with the transformation of digital government and grassroots governments' actions to demonstrate loyalty to the central authority, PB may gain new stages of development and viability. Without the support of local government officials and policy makers, PB practices often struggle to sustain.

However, PB in Chengdu is an exceptional case. Initially driven by local politicians and applied in local democratic governance, urban-rural development and public service policies, it continues to play a role in local public service delivery and grassroots governance even after the politicians have left. This practice persists by injecting public resources into rural areas, addressing the urban-rural development imbalance in China, exploring and developing grassroots democratic governance, improving grassroots livelihoods and increasing residents' satisfaction with local governments. Therefore, it can exist relatively stable. However, like in Chengdu, the practice of livelihood micro-projects in Shenzhen has not been able to last for a long time due to the capacity of policy design and implementation, as well as the change of government officials.

In the early stages of implementing PB practices, active promotion by local politicians, local officials, and academics is often required, but in the long run, the sustainability of PB actions is determined by whether the practices are combined with the operation and evolution of the local political system and whether it can meet the overall political and governance objectives.

**Depth and Breadth of Engagement**

In Chinese PB practice, there are different understandings and value recognitions of what constitutes PB, which has different breadth and depth of citizen participation. According to the narrower understanding, under the country's constitution, budgeting is the responsibility and function of the People's Congresses at all bureaucratic levels, and the People's Congress system is the agency responsible for drafting, approving, supervising and evaluating budgets. Only the practice of citizen participation in the budget process, carried out within the organizational system of the People's Congress, can be considered PB. In many cities of China, research and pilot attempts in PB are also conducted under the system of the People's Congress. For example, PB in Wenling, Harbin, Jiaozuo. However, due to the highly organized nature of the People's Congress system, many ordinary citizens often find it difficult to participate conveniently and deeply; at the same time, because the People's Congress system is often unable to cover all the detailed public service needs related to citizens' daily lives, many citizens also lack the motivation to participate.

In the broader understanding, citizens participate in the formulation, distribution, execution, supervision, and evaluation of public budgets, even if they are not within the organizational framework of the People's Congress system, and this is also a practice of PB. Citizens in this broader participatory practice are no longer constrained by the strict



organizational nature of the People's Congress and the qualifications and restrictions on communication, consultation, collaboration, and negotiation restrictions of the People's Congress' members. They can participate in public budgeting in very flexible and convenient ways. PB in Beijing, Chengdu, Shenzhen and other places has such characteristics. Residents can participate in the budget distribution and execution process around them in any ways outside the organizational system of the People's Congress. Such participation can attract the attention of many more residents; at the same time, it is also conducive to exploring the local democratic governance practices on a larger scale under diversification.

### Challenges

Chinese PB faces a number of challenges and difficulties that may affect its effectiveness and sustainability.

First, in the PB process, access to information is a critical issue. The public has limited and effective channels to obtain fiscal information, and the latter usually requires expertise, making it difficult for ordinary people to understand and grasp complex fiscal knowledge, thus limiting their participation and its quality, which is usually the case of participatory budgeting under the People's Congress system. To solve this problem, it is necessary to improve the accessibility and public awareness of fiscal information, to enable the people to participate more effectively in the budgetary decision-making process.

Second, unlike some other countries or regional governments, the practice of PB in China does not have a specific national law, local law, or regulation. This means that governments are not obliged to implement PB, follow specific procedures or ensure that citizens' opinions are meaningfully considered. This lack of legal backing makes PB vulnerable to termination or modification at the whim of local authorities. This also makes the continuation of PB initiatives heavily depending on the support of individual government officials or political leaders. If these individuals leave office or priorities change, PB programs may be discontinued or scaled back. A third disadvantage of the lack of institutionalization and standardization is limited integration into existing budgetary processes, especially in the People's Congress system. PB is often implemented as a separate process rather than effectively integrated into the regular budget cycle. This can lead to a disconnect between citizen input and actual budget allocations. It can also create tension between PB processes and existing budget procedures, potentially undermining the impact of citizen participation. In addition, as a result of the lack of standardized procedures, clear rules and guidelines, PB implementation may vary significantly across different localities, making it difficult to assess PB effectiveness and compare results; even when some guidelines or procedures exist, there may be weak enforcement mechanisms to ensure that they are followed. This can lead to situations where citizen input is ignored or manipulated, undermining the credibility of the PB process.

### Digital Participatory Budgeting

With the rapid development of information technology, the use of new technologies to improve the efficiency and quality of PB has become a pressing issue to be addressed. The application of new technologies can bring innovative methods and tools to PB, increase the convenience of public participation and transparency in budget decision-making.

The PB practices in Chengdu, Wenling, and Shenzhen have applied information technology and digitization to varying degrees. Specifically, these technologies are used to promote transparency and empower residents to vote, supervise and evaluate. Unlike traditional methods of information disclosure, websites, social media and other digital platforms can display relevant details of PB to the public 24 hours a day at very low cost. This greatly improves the previous situation where people had to go to specific locations and browse

limited information in paper documents. Now any resident can conveniently access all disclosed information and materials on PB anytime and anywhere, using a computer or smart phone.

Furthermore, information technology equally empowers every resident with the same rights to vote, supervise and evaluate. For example, after Chengdu adopted digital methods to collect residents' proposals and conduct voting, the process was no longer limited to the opinions and votes of the head of each household as it used to be. Previously, since the head of the household was often a young or middle-aged male, the needs of women, children and the elderly were easily overlooked. Now, however, every family member and every community resident have an equal opportunity to express their opinions independently. The use of information technology provides more opportunities for expression and decision-making rights.

Going further, the use of text and semantic analysis technologies can greatly improve the efficiency of processing residents' demands and requests. Before the adoption of information technologies, it was impossible for a community worker to process tens of thousands of residents' requests and opinions within two weeks, including classifying, aggregating, responding to them, and forming proposals for voting. Automated information technology has increased the efficiency of this process thousands of times, saved a significant amount of labor and time and prevented fraud, misrepresentation of residents' needs and opinions, inaction and lack of response from community workers. In addition, information technology can help fight corruption, detect deception and fraud, as well as monitor project implementation and improve the efficiency of budget utilization.

The practice of PB in China has shown that this democratic governance model can to some extent improve transparency and public satisfaction with government budgeting. Different regional practices show that China has made certain progress in promoting PB, but also exposed some problems and challenges. In the future, with the development of information technologies, increasing citizen awareness and optimizing the policy environment, PB is expected to be more widely applied and developed in China, becoming an important way to deepen the modernization of public administration.

### **THE FUTURE OF PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING IN CHINA: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES**

The challenges identified in this study highlight key areas for future research and policy development needed to realize the full potential of PB in China. To enhance its effectiveness and foster true citizen empowerment, future research should delve into the effectiveness of various interventions designed to improve citizens' fiscal literacy and participation skills. This includes exploring different pedagogical approaches, such as interactive workshops, online tutorials and community-based training programs, and assessing their impact on citizens' ability to understand complex budget information, formulate informed proposals and engage effectively in deliberative processes. Additionally, research is needed on developing effective budget balance and resource allocation mechanisms to ensure fairness, transparency, and long-term sustainability of PB. This involves investigating different models for project prioritization, funding allocation and oversight, and assessing their impact on equity, efficiency and public satisfaction.

Furthermore, a promising area of research is exploring the transformative potential of new technologies, such as the Internet, big data analytics and artificial intelligence to improve PB processes. This includes investigating the design and implementation of online platforms for broader and more inclusive participation, data-driven analysis for more informed and evidence-based decision-making, and AI-powered tools for facilitating public deliberation and consensus building. However, the ethical concerns and potential biases associated with



the use of these technologies in participatory governance need to be carefully considered, ensuring that they promote equity and transparency rather than exacerbate existing inequalities.

From a theoretical perspective, this study emphasizes the need to further explore the complex interplay between formal institutions (e.g., the People's Congress system) and informal mechanisms of participation in the Chinese context. This includes investigating how PB initiatives interact with existing governance structures, power dynamics and bureaucratic processes, and exploring the potential for institutional reforms to better integrate citizen participation into formal decision-making. Moreover, this research contributes to the broader literature on collaborative governance by providing empirical evidence from a unique political and cultural context. International comparative studies based on the experiences of other countries with established PB practices can offer valuable insights on transferring best practices and adapting PB models to different political and cultural contexts. Such comparative analysis can shed light on specific factors contributing to the success and sustainability of PB in different settings, which can help inform policy development in China and beyond.

By addressing these research gaps and implementing the recommended strategies, we can create a more conducive environment for PB in China, fostering greater citizen engagement, improving public service delivery, and ultimately promoting more inclusive and democratic governance.

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*The article submitted February 24, 2025  
Approved after reviewing March 11, 2025  
Accepted for publication April 4, 2025*

<https://doi.org/10.31107/2075-1990-2025-2-72-81>

## Обзор практики партисипаторного бюджетирования в Китае

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### Аннотация

В настоящей статье рассматриваются вопросы развития и реализации партисипаторного бюджетирования (ПБ) в городах Китая, таких как Пекин, Цзяоцзо, Шэньчжэнь. Описаны особенности городских практик ПБ, уровень и масштабы участия граждан. Анализируется влияние политических и институциональных факторов на эффективность ПБ. Отдельное внимание уделяется роли цифровых технологий в повышении открытости бюджетного процесса, расширении возможностей участия граждан в партисипаторном бюджетировании и усилении общественного контроля. В заключение обсуждаются перспективы развития ПБ в Китае, необходимость законодательных реформ, внедрения цифровых решений и рекомендаций международных сравнительных исследований, которые помогут сделать этот механизм более устойчивым и эффективным.

**Ключевые слова:** партисипаторное бюджетирование в Китае, общественные финансы, гражданское вовлечение, цифровое управление, участие граждан

**JEL:** H61, H83, P35

**Для цитирования:** Ming Zhuang (2025). Review of Participatory Budgeting Practices in China. *Financial Journal*, 17 (2), 72–81. <https://doi.org/10.31107/2075-1990-2025-2-72-81>.

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Статья поступила в редакцию 24.02.2025

Одобрена после рецензирования 11.03.2025

Принята к публикации 04.04.2025