

The Studies of Accountability – China and Beyond

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How to hold government accountable is a fundamental question in political science. The convention wisdom contends that the Chinese political system does have effective mechanisms, such as democratic institutions and independent anti-corruption agencies, to hold government accountable, resulting in widespread abuse of power and rampant corruption. However, students of Chinese politics point out that the absence of these mechanisms has not led to the demise of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), nor undermining China's economic performance in the last three decades. Compared to other authoritarian regimes and newly democratized countries, the CCP is still an effective party, and Chinese economy remains strong in spite of recent stagnation.

The political and economic development in China is indeed puzzling, thus raising several fundamental questions concerning the causes and consequences of political accountability. First, *to whom* the politicians are held accountable? The conventional definition of accountability stresses holding politicians accountable to the public. Nonetheless, politicians' behaviors are also constrained by other political actors. Second, *what are the effective mechanisms* that hold politicians accountable? In addition to electoral institutions, are there any mechanisms might provide checks and balances on politicians' behaviors, and if so, are they effective? Third, *what kind of behaviors* should politicians be held accountable? Extant studies tend to focus on constraining politicians' bad behaviors (e.g., corruption, abuse of political power), but what about rewarding good behaviors? After all, accountability is about taking responsibility for one's behavior, whether they are good or bad.

In this essay, I briefly review the existing studies of accountability in China through the lens of these three aforementioned dimensions. I then extend the discussion between knowledge accumulated in the studies of Chinese Politics with broader comparative politics studies on political accountability. I conclude by offering my reflections on some research opportunities in Chinese politics could potentially enhance our understanding of political accountability given a re-conceptualization of political accountability.

Studies of Accountability in China

The conventional conceptualization of political accountability maintains that government should be held accountable to the public. This conceptualization engenders two implications. First, it implies accountability becomes an agency problem in a principal-agent relationship between the public (principal) and the government (agent). Second, elections serve as the primary mechanism that allows the (powerless) public to hold (powerful) politicians accountable.

The studies of grassroots governance and elite/bureaucratic politics in China, however, suggest that we might want to consider expanding this conceptualization of political accountability for two reasons. First, elections are not necessarily the only (or best) sanctioning device to hold

government accountable for several reasons.¹ Ordinary citizens could also hold government accountable through informal institutions. Second, if political accountability is about holding politicians responsible for their behaviors, constraints imposed by other political elites could potentially achieve the same objectives.

To begin, the studies of grassroots governance have shed important lights on the promises and limitations on elections as the accountability mechanism. The launch of village elections in China in the 1987 has sparked excitement among many scholars on the potential path to democratization in China. Although village elections have strengthened regime legitimacy and generated some positive impact on public goods provision, a large body of empirical research in the last two decades have shown that village elections have not greatly improved rural governance in China.² Chinese citizens still rely on other forms of political participation, such as personal connection, protests, and petitions, in order to resolve grievances and hold local officials accountable.³ Reviewing the mounting evidence from studies of rural elections, O'Brien and Han (2009) argue the village elections have only increased "accessing power", but not "exercising power" in rural China. One could argue that the problems of village elections are due to irregularities in their implementation, therefore elections are not the culprit for failing to hold local officials accountable. However, Robert Dahl once argues that there are no "democracies," only "polyarchies," since no democracy is "completely or almost completely responsive to all its citizens" (Dahl 1971, p.2).

Because village elections have not been an effective mechanism to hold local officials accountable in China, scholars have turned to other mechanisms, such as informal institutions and political culture, to understand the sources of political accountability. For instance, recent studies have shown that the informal norms generated by lineage groups could help hold local officials accountable in rural China (Tsai 2007; Xu and Yao 2015). Meanwhile, Shi (2015) argues that culture and norms play an important role in shaping political attitudes and behavior in China, and Confucianism remains a guiding principle in everyday life in China (Bell 2008; Shi and Lü 2010).

More importantly, the lack of electoral institutions does not mean that Chinese officials are not being held accountable for their behaviors. Students of elite politics and Chinese bureaucracy would argue that Chinese politicians, even top leaders, face a number of constraints. For instance, a large body of studies have relied on a factionalism model to depict the political struggle among elites and explain their career mobility.⁴ In addition, Shirk (1993) proposed a selectorate theory that suggests a reciprocal accountability between the ruler and selectors in order to better understand the logic of economic policymaking in China. Although these models face some

¹ See Ashworth (2012) for a review of electoral accountability. Przeworski, Stokes, and Mannin (1999) contains several essays that discusses the advantages and disadvantages of political accountability through elections.

² For the effects of village elections on regime legitimacy, see for example Landry, Davis, and Wang (2010), Li (2003), Manion (2006). For the effects of election on rural public goods provision, see for example Luo et al. (2007), Zhang et al. (2004). See O'Brien and Han (2009) for the evaluation of village elections on local governance.

³ For studies of personal connection and clientelism as form of political behaviors in China, see for example Oi (1985, 1989) and Shi (1997). For protest and petition, see the literature of contentious politics such as Cai (2008) and O'Brien and Li (2006).

⁴ See for example Li and Walder (2001), Nathan (1973), Shih (2008), Teiwes (1993), and Walder (1995).

limitations given the underlying assumptions and measurement issues,⁵ one important implication of these arguments is that political elites are holding each other accountable for their behaviors.

The studies of Chinese political institutions and local politics provide another large body of work concerning the implicit or explicit checks and balances facing government officials. One of the most prominent theory is the “fragmented authoritarianism” model (Lieberthal and Oksenberg 1988; Lieberthal and Lampton 1992; Mertha 2009), which is deeply rooted in the complex organizational structure of the party and the government. Other scholars have investigated the institutionalization of CCP rule in the last two decades, arguing that these changes have significantly shape government behavior. For instance, the succession of political leadership has become more normalized since the 1990s (Miller 2008). In addition, the CCP has introduced the cadre responsibility system that generates various incentives and constraints facing local officials in order to promote economic development (Edin 2005; Manion 1985; Oi 1999; Whiting 2004). Yang (2004) further argues that the CCP has established a number of “horizontal accountability” institutions to induce good governance.

In recent years, the studies of China’s legislative institutions and government responsiveness have generated additional insights. For example, several studies have shown that delegates in both the national and local People’s Congresses increasingly channel their constituents’ interests into policymaking, especially in areas such as public goods and services (Manion 2014a; Manion 2014b; Truex 2016). Meanwhile, local governments sometimes do respond to citizen demands expressed online (Chen, Pan, and Xu 2016; Distelhorst and Hou 2017).

The effectiveness of these alternative accountability institutions is still subject to debate. First, several studies have shown that these institutions induce local officials to focus on policy targets and mandates established by higher-level governments, and local officials strategically exert their efforts in more observable policy targets (Birney 2014; Lü and Landry 2014; O’Brien and Li 1999). Second, Chinese legislative institutions remains largely an ineffective accountability institution to generate meaningful challenges toward government officials, especially at the higher level of the legislative branches.⁶ Third, the internal cadre evaluation system aims to enhance the CCP’s performance legitimacy, but it could become the Achilles’ heel if the government cannot fulfill its promises and obligations due to potential economic stagnation (Zhao 2009; Lü 2014). Finally, and probably most importantly, the degree of local government responsiveness is driven by their fear of local instability, a “veto policy target” that could ruin their political careers. In other words, the various internal “checks and balances” institutions created by the CCP remain the fundamental mechanism that holds government officials accountable to their behaviors.

The (or lack of) Connection with Studies of Accountability in Comparative Politics

If we employ the conventional definition of political accountability, the studies of Chinese politics has generated some insights on our understanding of political accountability both within and beyond China. For example, the problems facing village elections in rural China are not unique

⁵ For criticism of the selectorate theory on Chinese politics, see Gallagher and Hanson (2015).

⁶ Truex (2016) coined the term “representation within bounds” to describe the function of the National People’s Congress in China. Manion (2008) discusses the 1995 reform that changes to party regulations that allows the CCP to nominate better candidates in order to avoid the disastrous voting outcome of their proposed candidates in some provinces in the early 1990s.

when comparing to problems facing other newly democratic regimes, such as vote buying and local elite capture. The importance of informal institutions and political culture is also stressed in many comparative politics studies. However, the studies of informal institutions in China have not significantly altered the debate of political accountability in comparative politics. At the first glance, it is puzzling because the studies of informal institutions on political accountability in China should have travelled well with mainstream studies of comparative politics because of their common conceptualization of these institutions. Nonetheless, precisely because informal institutions and political culture have been well studied in comparative politics, it is extremely challenging to generate groundbreaking new insights by studying Chinese politics.

Meanwhile, the studies of elite politics and bureaucratic politics in China have accumulated fruitful knowledge, but the knowledge remains exclusively about Chinese politics with little connection to existing comparative politics studies.⁷ The absence of a dialog stems from three obstacles. First, the arguments developed in these studies are often very specific to the Chinese social, political, and economic contexts, thus making their implications difficult to travel to other countries. Second, the methodologies used in many of these studies are often descriptive and qualitative in nature, while quantitative methods have become widely preferred empirical strategy in the mainstream comparative politics. Lastly, the conventional definition of political accountability is about holding politicians accountable to the public, and the internal checks and balances of Chinese officials within the governmental organization does not fit this definition.

I would argue that the first two obstacles have been increasingly overcome in the last few years. The growing interests in authoritarian politics and the rise of China have attracted greater attention to Chinese politics from the general audience of comparative politics. The methodological training of a new generation of Chinese scholars allows them to employ various cutting-edge empirical methodologies similar to other comparative politics studies. The growing number of publications on Chinese politics in mainstream political science journals, such as *APSR*, *AJPS*, *JOP*, *CPS*, attest that the studies of Chinese politics have started to develop a dialog with mainstream comparative politics studies.

However, overcoming the third obstacle is more challenging—it requires a re-conceptualization of political accountability, which could be subject to intensive debate. Not everyone agrees that the internal constraints facing government officials in China is on an equal grounding with the constraints imposed by the public in democratic regimes. Citing poor governance in China, one could argue that the checks and balances by these Chinese institutions have not provided genuine accountability (Pei 2006).

Could the studies of internal check and balances among political elites in China be a fruitful future research opportunity to understand political accountability? The answer to this question depends on what the existing puzzles in the studies of political accountability are, and whether the China case could enlighten our understanding of accountability. I would argue that there are actually several potential questions that studies of internal checks and balances in China could potentially contribute our understanding of political accountability beyond China.

⁷ The only exception is the selectorate model, which has been extended in Bueno de Mesquita et al. (2003) and Besley and Kudamatsu (2008).

For example, **what is the role of elite politics on political accountability?** Existing comparative politics studies of accountability emphasizes a principle-agent relationship between the public and government. However, this analytical framework potentially overlooks the lack of efficacy of the public to hold government accountable because ordinary citizens face a number of challenges, such as costs of collective action and information problem, to effectively hold government accountable. Alternatively, political and economic elites often have greater efficacy to constrain government behavior. In fact, the studies of internal checks and balances in the Chinese political system are fundamentally driven by elite politics. As a result, the ways through which elite politics shape political accountability remain an open question. It is worth exploring comparatively why the elite politics in China are able to generate these types of internal accountability system that other authoritarian regimes fail to do so. More broadly, why do some authoritarian regimes develop better internal accountability mechanisms to enhance regime stability?

In addition, **what are the accountability mechanism that could engender good behaviors from the government instead of focusing on constraining bad behaviors?** Individual incentive structure is always about “carrots and sticks”, meaning that individual behavior is shaped by both rewards and punishment. Existing comparative politics studies have been stressing the “sticks” side of accountability, but what about the “carrots”? What kind of mechanism induces good behaviors of the government that could even outweigh the bad behaviors? The studies of Chinese politics, especially concerning economic reforms, have often investigated how the government establishes incentives to induce local government to promote economic growth. The expansion to this line of research could potentially enlighten the discourse of political selection mechanism—competence vis-à-vis accountability/representation—as the primary criteria in engendering good policy outcomes.

Finally, **is the elite politics driven accountability mechanism a permanent equilibrium outcome, or it is a temporary equilibrium outcome at a different stage of political development in the society?** Stasavage (2016) has pointed out that endogenous rise of consent and representation is unique to Western European countries compared to other regions of the world, and he argues that the different political path in Europe may have been an accident. However, one important lesson on the political development in medieval Western Europeans is that the enfranchisement of the general population did not happen overnight, and elite politics was at the forefront in driving the institutional changes. Studying the institutional changes of elite driven accountability in China, especially comparing with other developing countries, may bring fruitful insights to this question.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have briefly reviewed the existing studies of political accountability in China and its connection, or lack of, with comparative politics. I argue that the existing China studies of accountability face three obstacles in building a dialog with comparative politics. I believe overcoming the first two obstacles can rely on the “importing” model in which scholars apply existing comparative politics theories and methodologies to study Chinese politics. Overcoming the third obstacle requires an “exporting” model, meaning these studies on Chinese politics have to generate new theories that contribute to our general understanding of political accountability beyond the Chinese context. This is not an easy task because it has to change the ways we

conceptualize and understand political accountability. Despite this challenge, the studies of elite and bureaucratic politics at both central and local levels could potentially present fruitful opportunities to advance our understanding of political accountability beyond China.

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