

Memo: Reflections on Accountability and Chinese Politics¹

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The concept of accountability can be understood in many ways, involving different actors inside the state and between the state and its citizens. Accountability entails knowing whether officials are punished as well as whether citizens get a sufficient response from the state.² There is also accountability within the state involving cadre evaluation and promotion along with regulations and sanctions. While within the state the system of promotion and cadre evaluation have long been topics of inquiry within Chinese politics, that between the state and citizens is a relatively recent development following the post-Mao reform and opening. This memo will focus, in particular, on accountability between the state and its citizens.

Changing Institutional Contexts

Earlier in the China field there were no discussions of “accountability” between individuals and the state. The discussion was bifurcated into the distinct actions of individual citizens and the state. Studies examined how individuals participated in politics and how the state controlled individuals and information and used the press for propaganda. Little thought was given to “responsiveness” of the state, other than in theories about the mass line. Formal modes of participation that at least in theory implied accountability, such as elections, were dismissed as meaningless. Participation, as argued in Townsend’s classic work, was mobilized participation (Townsend, 1969).

Instead of responsiveness or accountability, researchers studied how people pursued their interests through informal channels, such as through connections and more particularistic forms, including clientelism. Research found that it was most effective to pursue interest through the non-articulation of interests, using covert rather than overt channels.

A general finding from that early work is that the institutional context in which people live and work determines the effectiveness of different modes of participation they use to pursue interests.

But China’s reform and opening greatly changed the institutional context. There is no question about such economic changes. Less clear are the political changes. But I would argue that with the many economic changes also came political changes, even if these were not always made explicit. In the literature one sees evidence that the state itself is now more concerned about building regime legitimacy. Through content analysis of Shanghai newspapers, a CCTV legal show and statistical analysis of a randomly sampled survey, Stockmann and Gallagher (2011) show how the state uses Chinese media to increase regime legitimacy and effectively rule by positively propagandizing citizens’ experiences

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² For a much more comprehensive and useful review see Tsai (2017).

in the legal system. Is this an example of the state trying to foster an image of being accountable?

Insights into other strategic uses of the press by the state to promote an image of accountability are provided by Lorentzen (2014), who formalized an established argument among China scholars that the CCP benefited from an active watchdog media that helps keep local officials in check. He identifies when the state allows a freer press and how it uses this information.

Huang, using surveys of college students, suggests an alternative use of propaganda, arguing that it deters citizens from revolt by showcasing the state's capacity for social control (Huang 2015a). Using a similar survey of college students, Huang explores the relationship between information and state support by measuring the relationship between knowledge of foreign countries and support for the home regime (Huang 2015b).

Studies of accountability were spawned by the state's increased desire to project responsiveness. New channels for citizen participation in China's authoritarian system were established and following those institutional developments, new studies emerged. Village elections spawned a huge literature, based on case studies as well as surveys, yielding a mixed view, at best, about the effectiveness of this mechanism.³ More recently, on the one hand, we find that there has been vote buying, which, I would argue, is a positive sign that these elections now actually mean something. On the other hand, we also find that the institutional context is changing with the establishment of new rural communities (*nongcun shequ*), especially those that merge villages. What will happen to village elections as the management committees of the *shequ* gain in importance?

The state further created "input" institutions that are supposed to solicit citizen participation and inject their opinions into the policy making process. Case studies describe how the public participates in deliberative democracy to make public budgets (He 2011; He and Warren 2011). More recent work argues that the delivery of public goods through civil society with citizen participation results in better service provision as well as more satisfied citizens (Teets 2013). Only recently, however, has there been an empirical test of whether citizen participation in the policy process actually increases citizen support for the regime, but questions remain about how enduring such feelings are (Truex 2016).

The "Open Government Initiative" came into existence in 2007, when the Chinese state created an accessible, visible window into citizen demands and complaints and published the public response by government agencies. This generated a big wave of new studies. China specialists, armed with sophisticated tools, especially for getting information from the internet, have leveraged the existences of these newly created channels. In particular, they have examined the mayors' mailboxes, to study the interaction between citizens and the state, as a measure of accountability. Employing online field experiments they have tested various hypotheses about the responsiveness of authoritarian governments to citizen demands (Chen, Pan, and Xu 2015; Distelhorst and Hou 2017). Some have also explored whether there is ethnic discrimination in their pattern of responses (Distelhorst and Hou 2014).

³ This literature is massive and reviewed in a number of other places, including Tsai 2017.

How Far Have We Come?

While we have moved into a different universe in terms of methods, if the articles that have made it into the top political science journals are any indication, topics of study suggest renewed interest in the formal institutions for participation, akin to those in the earlier political participation literature. Rich empirical work on postings to mayors' mailboxes, for example, is about participation, but there is a difference. Now there is a second part to the research question that tries to measure if there is a response to the act of participation.

China would like to portray itself as having a much more open and responsive system with mechanisms that purport to foster accountability. But is China at the point where these formal channels of participation serve the role that the state asserts that it does and lead to accountability? What challenges do we face as we study these institutions and use the data available about them?

Yes, many local governments are responsive to citizen inquiries and complaints, in the sense that they reply in varying degrees of detail to the posts, but what are we measuring? Is it the responsiveness of various government entities or simply the efficiency and responsiveness of individual clerks tasked with writing replies? It is unclear whether we yet know the answer to the "so what" question. If one is interested in accountability, just having measures of participation by or attitudes of citizens and responses by government agencies still fall short. As current works themselves acknowledge, to fully measure accountability, we need to have the answer to why such modes of participation and the resulting government response matters – i.e., the "so what" question. We need to know what happens after the response, regardless of how long or short. Do problems actually get resolved? Does the citizen get the *dibao* or get help finding employment? Does the fact that the ethnic minority gets or doesn't get a response matter to his or her daily life and work? We don't know the efficacy of that action by an individual citizen other than the length and how quickly it elicits a response from the local government.

Townsend and others pointed out years ago that China has a very impressive array of channels for political participation, if they all operated as advertised and if the information is actually used. The same holds true for accountability. But the question was, and I would argue, remains the extent to which that information is used and for what purpose. The decision by the center to institute village elections was a way to manage and obtain information on local governance and official malfeasance (Oi, 1996). Media can be used as a watchdog, citizens can go to budget setting meetings, and participate in setting up providers of public goods, but while some have tried to provide a formal model (Chen and Xu 2017) and some have even suggested that officials are willing to incorporate public opinion in policy making (Meng, Pan, and Yang 2014), there remains many questions about how and whether any of this info is used in policymaking and actually affects the way that the political system operates. How, if at all, does this information affect the core of Chinese politics?

Where do we need to go?

In thinking about where the field needs to go, I would urge that we re-examine, after four decades of reform, the institutional context to update our understanding of the core of the Chinese state and politics. In other words, we need to better understand the context in which things like the mayors' mailboxes, or the NPC online forums, were created and operate. Such an understanding would provide a more in-depth understanding of how such information is being used. This ultimately would provide further information on whether such types of input institutions actually result in more accountability. This will allow us to assess these new institutions and the role that they play in Chinese politics.

Moreover, as studies of these quasi-democratic institutions themselves note, the core political system has not changed. The state has just created new institutions. If so, then one must probe the relationship between the new and still existing old institutions. Why create the mayors' mailboxes when there was and is an already developed system of "office of letters and visits" (*xinfangban*) or other similar offices within government agencies?⁴ When and why do some citizens post on these mailboxes while others still send complaints to the *xinfangban*?

While it may seem a bit "old school," I think we need to return to studying core institutions of the Chinese Party-state to see how they have changed and now operate. Walking on two legs, we can study individual political behavior but we need to also study the context that may be shaping that behavior. Current developments in China have prompted me to think that we need to go back to the study of core institutions, which many of us, including myself, have assumed had changed significantly by the decades of reform. Increasingly, I wonder whether we have overestimated the extent of change since the market reforms began in China.

Politics once again seem to be in command. No more division of work between state and Party. Power is being centralized with the Party in charge. How is this possible after so much economic institutional change? How is it working? People seem to be going along with demands to do political things that we know that people don't want to do, i.e., go to political study meetings, "to look in the mirror and take a bath," study political speeches, agree to teach certain types of classes... say the slogans and do the actions that were common during the Mao period, but which many of us thought were long dead as the market reforms took hold. But they are apparently not dead. Ideology is having a second coming, but is this the same ideology? What are the key mechanisms of current Party-state control that work, even in a well-developed market? Earlier studies and theories are worth revisiting to understand how the old system worked and to see what has or has not changed. We need to have a baseline to understand change and innovation.

Some might think that there is no need to study these institutions again. Not much seems to have changed, at least on the organizational charts.

⁴ These are akin to a "hot line" where problems and tips could be sent along with complaints and/or charges against officials or agencies.

But China's is a political system that is deceptive in the amount of change that has taken place under the cover of outward continuity. That is precisely the challenge. Leninist structures from years past still appear to be intact. But these old organizational structures may operate in surprising new ways in China's changed political and economic context.⁵ How do these outwardly unchanged institutions actually work now, what they do, how they do it, and who does it? We need to identify and assess which organizations and institutions are now key decision makers. How do these institutions shape individual behavior? What kinds of incentives and pressures shape the behaviors of people who must live and work in these institutions, and how do these institutions fit into the bureaucratic hierarchy? Data on such questions may not be readily available, but I am confident that we can marshal our greatly enhanced methodological skills and new theoretical frameworks to shed light on the evolving core of Chinese politics. We need to know how and why the current political system works and how much change has actually taken place. Doing so would allow us to study authoritarian resilience as well as change, including shedding light on questions about "accountability".

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⁵ In the spirit of full disclosure, this is the theme of an edited volume with Steven Goldstein (2018).

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