



Institutional Accountability or Individual Agency in China's Public Administration System?

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Abstract

How to improve the performance and efficiency of a public administration system has been an eternal challenge and a regular item on the government agenda. In contrast to an institutional check-and-balance mechanism, cadre education and training plays a special role in the Chinese socialist system. Educational work to inculcate desirable contents in cadres' thoughts has taken up a large part in the Party's efforts to enhance cadres' capability since the years of revolutionary struggle. It is a strategy adopted by the Party-state for the sake of making cadres loyal to the CCP in both political and administrative aspects. The study reviews the conceptual and theoretical discussion on the term "responsibility." The practices that the CCP adopted to create cadre responsibility in China are analyzed through the perspective of "structure-and-agency." The paper argues that individual agency goes beyond institutional accountability within China's Public Administration System.

Keywords

Cadre Education, Socialism, Party Governance, Responsibility, CCP

Introduction

How to enhance responsibility in government is a hot topic not only for academic research but also for political practice. In the 1930s the study of public administration became a new sub-field separated from political science. Rhodes (1996) states, "over the past fifteen years vogue words and phrases for reforming the public sector have come and gone. 'Rayner's Raiders' and the '3Es' of economy, efficiency and effectiveness gave way to the 'new public management' and 'entrepreneurial government'" (p. 652). The reforms were to improve performance through adopting the management approach and structure of the market with the lesser accountability of government. Still, we face the question, it is not clear how we may ensure and improve the responsibility of government. In contrast with western democratic institutions, how does the Chinese government sustain and improve responsibility? What are the right mixes that make a government more likely to act responsibly towards its people? What are the effects? To answer the questions, the study reviews the concept of responsibility and the practices that the CCP has adopted.

The Paradoxical concept of responsibility

The concept of responsibility became increasingly meaningful and essential as a way to formulate a common set of values, as well as a way of filling the gaps by defining the scope of accountability and obligation in contexts of law and common culture (Mckeeon, 1957; Winter, 1966). By virtue of the complication and continuous changes in society, by now there is no precise meaning of the term. The discussion is broad, from the ideology to actual application in various fields, from the individual level to the Nation-state. The philosopher Williams (1993) argues that four basic elements are relevant to the construction of responsibility: cause, intention, state, and response. It is easier to sink into the huge question: what exactly is responsibility? Is it an ethical concept, a natural propensity, an attitude, a role-related behavior, or it is a guideline of action, a method for accountability of behaviors?

The development of “responsibility”

As Winter (1966) mentions, “responsibility is a relatively new term in the ethical vocabulary, appearing in the 19th century with a somewhat ambiguous meaning (p. 254).” Mckeon (1957) puts forward that the term responsibility appeared in 1787 and was initially used for the political institutions arising out of American and French revolutions (p. 5). The idea of responsibility can also be traced to Aristotle, who advocated the importance of the rule of law in the process of governance. Auhagen and Bierhoff (2001) maintained that “the construct of responsibility developed during the past centuries from the so-called classical perspective, namely being responsible for something which has happened in the past, up to a more general ethical perspective which involves being responsible for the consequences of one’s behavior, which may not even be foreseeable” (p. 179).

Since Weber (1921, 2018) used ‘responsibility’ as an ethical concept in a wide field, more theoretical and practical studies have investigated the complexity of responsibility. Mckeon (1957) proposed three related dimensions of responsibility: “an external dimension in legal and political analysis in which the state imposes penalties on individual actions and in which officials and governments are held accountable for policy and action; [...] an internal dimension in moral and ethical analysis in which the individual takes into account the consequences of his actions and the criteria which bear on his choices; [and] a comprehensive or reciprocal dimension in social and cultural analysis in which values are ordered in the autonomy of an individual character and the structure of a civilization” (p. 5). Accordingly, responsibility means ‘accountability,’ ‘imputability,’ and ‘freedom and rationality.’ Firstly, individuals are accountable to the state, while the officials and government are accountable for the policies. Secondly, individuals are responsible for their own choices and actions. Finally, individuals in the society are free and rational to choose the values they would like to obey. The first dimension of responsibility is analogous to ‘structure or institution.’ It means external structure outside of an agent that should comply with it. The second and third parts stress an individual’s agency to make its own choice and be responsible for it.

Around the 1980s, the scholars returned to the issue of responsibility. At that time the primary interest was ‘administrative responsibility.’ In order to clarify the meaning of responsibility, Harmon (1995) proposed three root meanings for responsibility: agency, accountability, and obligation. Agency is the idea of intentionality or free will, which means people are moral agents who freely choose. It is a necessity of responsibility and a necessary precursor to the two other components – accountability and obligation. Accountability is an authoritative relationship in which one person is formally entitled to demand that another answer for – that is, provide an account of – his or her actions. Thirdly, “obligation introduces an explicitly moral meaning of responsibility by suggesting that one should, or should not, perform a particular action (p. 26).”

Internal or external responsibility

In the 1940s, Finer (1941), a political scientist, maintained that responsibility has two definitions. “First, responsibility may mean that x is accountable for y to z; second, responsibility may mean an inward personal sense of moral obligation. In the first definition the essence is the externality of the agency or persons to whom an account is to be rendered, and it can mean very little without that agency having authority over x, determining the lines of x’s obligation and the terms of its continuance or revocation. The second definition puts the emphasis on the conscience of the agent, and it follows from the definition that if he commits an error, it is an error only when recognized by his own conscience, and that the punishment of the agent will be merely the twinges thereof (p. 336)”. After nearly 50 years, a sociological scholar, Barnes (1999), asserted that the concept of responsibility “intuitively evokes two different notions [...] in one sense, to be responsible for a decision or an action is to be answerable and accountable in relation to it, liable to praise and blame for it, obliged to respond to claims ensuing from it [...] in another sense, however, responsibility is an internal state: an individual is responsible if she is capable of rational conduct, that is, if her cognitive and reasoning capabilities are in adequate working order, and permit her to operate as a recognizable moral agent (p. 6)”.

Since we live in a system of social institutions and with social relationships with others, we, as individual persons, are accountable to others as a result of authorities or relations; at the same time, I, a given individual, with a normal mental state, am able to reason and make independent judgments. For me, although it is similar to other dichotomies, e.g., subjective and objective, this classification of “individual and social” or “internal or external,” tries to separate the meaning of reasonability by simple words – “we” and “I.” That is to say, we are accountable to “others” in the group of “ourselves,” and I am responsible to “myself.” Here, we might become confused with the aforementioned classification in that the concepts of “individual and social” could be interpreted by the idea of unit; however, “social” is equal to “social relations” in the concrete context. Therefore, within public administration, the government, as an organization, owns social and individual reasonability; moreover, the administrators and politicians, as the individual, have social and individual reasonability simultaneously.

Harmon (1995) describes the tensions between individual responsibility and social responsibility as following: “Obligation and personal agency represent two opposing moral meanings of responsibility. Obligation implies that morality derives from sources external to people such as law, formal authority, and moral principles, whereas agency suggests that the moral nature of responsibility is intrinsic to the human psyche or soul. Those who hold that personal agency supersedes obligation are in turn divided over whether people’s moral nature is located a priori in the individual or produced through the individual’s experience in social relationships (pp. 26-27).

On the one hand, if administrators are free to choose or behave freely, then they are guilty of denying their accountability to others; on the other hand, if they are only answerable to others, then they deny personal authorship of their actions.

Individual or organizational responsibility

To distinguish the meaning of reasonability by actors seems less relevant to the discussion of the preceding question – how to enhance responsibility in government? However, we should analyze it in terms of the actors as there are responsibility conflicts among different actors in public administration. Generally speaking, individual responsibility is inclined to the moral level, as in everyday life we just assign it to the individual unselfconsciously without explicit justification, and it has developed in either academic fields like philosophy and psychology, or professional fields like law and jurisprudence. Yet, the meaning of organizational responsibility is relatively narrowly used in the field of organizational study. Parsons (1956) and Thompson et al. (1967) delineated three levels of organizational responsibility: (a) the technical level – the effective performance of specialized and detailed functions; (b) managerial level – effective mediation among organizational technical elements and between its internal components and those external factors, e.g., customers or suppliers, in the task environment; and (c) institutional level – being part of the “wider social system which is the source of the meaning” (p. 17), legitimation, etc., which makes the organization’s goal implement possible.

Within public administration, organizational responsibility refers to the responsibility of government as a whole, as Robert (1967) argued. “Responsibility [...] is a basic democratic ideal” (p. 140). Dotson (1957) mentioned “in a real sense the problem of administrative responsibility is a problem of the entire political system” (p.726). Individual responsibility requires attention to the specific actors in government, including administrative officials, higher-level authorities, ministers, politicians, etc., in both the social and individual dimensions; that is to say, they need to be accountable to others as well as to themselves. There are tensions between individual reasonability and organizational reasonability because an organization is a group of individuals. Cooper (1987) sketches the dilemma between subordinates’ professional ethics and higher executive authority, which is inherent in hierarchical organizations.

Objective or subjective responsibility

Friedrich (1935) puts forward his thinking on responsibility in public administration: “Administrative officials seeking to apply scientific ‘standards’ have to account for their action [...]. If a specific designation were desirable, it might be well to call this type of responsibility ‘functional’ and ‘objective’ as contrasted with the general and ‘subjective’ types, such as religious, moral and political responsibility” (p. 38). In Friedrich’s idea, the main difference between objective and subjective responsibility is that the former exists for activities with scientific standards which demands administrative officials possess scientific information, while the latter is without “such standards.” Dotson (1957) went further to explain the difference as “objective responsibility demands action indicated by the scientific information relating to the problem under consideration; political responsibility is enforced by the people and their representatives exist for activities where scientific standards may be applied” (p. 709).

Realizing the complex of the term, some scholars began to combine different ideas together to analyze it. Gilbert (1959), for example, asserted that responsibility bounds a set of values generally linked together in the administrative process: responsiveness, efficacy, flexibility, consistency, stability, leadership, probity, candor, competence, prudence, due process, and accountability (p. 48). Gilbert’s understanding of reasonability seems comprehensive, but still confusing. Then, Mosher (1968) moved forward to present two possible meanings of responsibility: (a) objective responsibility, namely the responsibility of a person or an organization to someone else, outside of self, closely similar to “accountability”; (b) subjective responsibility, that is, “not upon to whom and for what one is responsible (according to the law and the organization chart), but to whom and for what one feels responsible and behaves responsibly [...] more nearly synonymous with identification, loyalty, and conscience than it is with accountability and answerability” (p. 8).

Cooper (1992) specifically delineates the dichotomy of subjective and objective responsibility. Objective responsibility relates to expectations imposed from outside, and Cooper argues that “the specific forms of objective responsibility include two dimensions: accountability and imposed obligation. All objective responsibility involves responsibility to someone, or some collective body, and responsibility for certain tasks, subordinate personnel, and goal achievement. The former is accountability, and the latter is obligation” (p. 81). Cooper considered there were three major types or sources from where expectations are imposed on administrators: (a) responsibility to elected officials through support for the law; (b) responsibility to superiors and for subordinates; and (c) responsibility to the citizenry. Subjective responsibility arises from individuals’ inner beliefs about loyalty, conscience, and identification. For Cooper, the internal sources of responsibility “may begin as external standards and expectations that become internalized over time through training and socialization” (p. 93).

As many scholars discuss, there is “Friedrich-Finer debate” – subjective vs. objective responsibility. Both Friedrich and Finer agree on two aspects of responsibility, while they stand in different positions. Friedrich (1935) asserts that the subjective one is more important in public administration. That is, for Friedrich, there are two important factors to assure administrators behave responsibly: their technical knowledge and social sensitivity to the popular sentiment. Nonetheless, Finer (1941) stresses objective responsibility by arguing that to enhance public servants’ responsibility, “an arrangement of correction and punishment even up to dismissal both of politicians and officials” (p.335), is more dependable. The same contention exists in Harmon (1995) and Cooper (1992). Harmon stressed the sense of subjective responsibility that requires the ability to cope with ambiguity and uncertainty, namely individual’s agency, is more fundamental. Although Cooper agreed with the importance of subjective responsibility, he held that subjective responsibility is secondary to objective responsibility and has a function supplementary to objective responsibility.

Keeping forward: Structure-agency oriented

The comprehensive classification of the diverse facets and faces of responsibility demand more taxonomic work (Auhagen & Bierhoff, 2001). It may refer to different everyday contexts, different cultural settings, a variety of manners of experiencing responsibility, or more theoretical dimensions like the level of freedom or type of consequences as a result of responsible or irresponsible actions. In a word, the term of responsibility has two aspects: (a) responsible by “structure,” and (b) responsible by “agency.” First, structure is external to individuals, like law, formal authority, moral principles, and so on, which is the patterned arrangement to influence or limit the individuals’ choices and opportunities. Individuals, groups, organization, and even the state or nation, are responsible to these kinds of structure. Second, individuals, groups, organization, etc. are responsible by their personal agency, which is “meaningful human behavior, individual or collective, that makes a significant difference in the natural and/or social worlds, either by direct, unmediated action or else through the mediation of tools, machines, dispositifs, institutions, or other affordances” (Moulaert et al, 2016, p. 169). As many scholars argue (Abrams, 1982; Archer, 1982; Bourdieu, 1977, 1989; Giddens, 1979, 1982, 1984), the relationship between structure and agency is intertwined. The above two aspects of responsibility are interlaced and beneficial for a responsible government.

CCP’s practices on responsibility

Generally speaking, Chinese leaders have championed numerous movements and reforms to foster responsibility. These reforms may be categorized into two groups, structural and motivational (Harding, 1981). The Mao-era witnessed the application of mostly motivational reforms, such as Rectification Campaigns in the 1940s and 1950s, Five-anti Movement in the 1960s, the Socialist Education Movement under Revised Later Ten Points in 1964, and May Seventh Cadre Schools in 1968. Since 1978, the reforms in pursuit of “opening up and modernization” have placed more emphasis on structures than motivations. New laws and regulations were enacted, and a new approach to governance, with the aim of achieving new national priorities, is reflected in the much-quoted statement of Deng Xiaoping, “Institution building is a decision factor.”¹ In the new era of opening-up and reform, the key issue for the CCP is the relationship between state and market. Practically, the relationship is like social dancing; that is, just as the dancing partners need to synchronize their steps and movements, the state and the market should also do a similar kind of synchronization. The market has gradually emerged as a major player after much trial and error, but the hands of the State are still very strong and visible, and intermingled with the forces of the market. The Party-state used a lot of strategies to adapt itself to the market.² Firstly, the Party-state decentralized economic power to local governments and State-owned Enterprises (SOEs), such as the power to handle investment decisions, land-use planning, and budgetary and off-budgetary revenues and expenditures, which provides economic incentives for local cadres and SOEs. Secondly, the Party-state promoted administrative reforms, for example, restructuring and streamlining government,³ fiscal reforms,⁴ strengthening bureaucratic capacity by changing the cadre management system⁵ to a civil service system,⁶ and anti-corruption reforms.⁷ Last and most importantly, the Party-state centralized political constraints by means of upward accountability (Chien, 2010) and the *Nomenklatura* system.⁸ In other words, the CCP strictly manages leading cadres who work in the

¹ Deng Xiaoping promoted systematic construction of the Party building and institutional reform (Chen, 2007)..

² For more discussion of how the Party-state adapts to the market, see Zheng (2004), Woetzel (2003), Fleisher et al. (2008); Wu & Yao (2008).

³ By 10 March 2013, the Party-state had launched seven rounds of reforms to restructure and streamline government successively in 1982, 1988, 1993, 1998, 2003, 2008, and 2013. For more discussion, see Cheung (2012), Christensen et al. (2008), Lan (2001) and Liu (2001).

⁴ For more information on fiscal reform, see Wong et al. (1996).

⁵ For more discussion of the cadre management system, see Barnett (1967), Harding (1981), Lee (1991), Schurmann (1968).

⁶ For more discussion of the civil service system, see Burns (2007) and Wang (2012).

⁷ For more discussion of anti-corruption reforms, see Cheung (2012) and He (2000).

⁸ For more discussion of the *Nomenklatura* system, see Burns (1987, 1988, 1994), Manion (1985), Chan (2004).

different levels of governments, public institutions, SOEs, mass organizations, non-governmental organizations, and even in private and foreign companies (Chen & Dickson, 2010; Dickson, 2003).⁹

Having cadres who perform duties responsibly is extremely important for both government performance and political stability in China. This task is extremely pivotal to its continuous hold on power for the one-party dictatorship. The structural approaches (Dotson, 1957) to enhancing government responsibility, such as improving the checks and balances between major institutions in the political system, promoting the rule of law, strengthening executive supremacy, corporate objectivity, or legislative supremacy, are all, for the time being, not practically applicable in China. Still, when compared with Mao, who had repetitively stressed the role of agency and called for exercise of self-discipline and voluntarism, the current and recent generations of leadership have paid more attention to structural incentives and constraints on cadres.¹⁰ Deng Xiaoping had attributed pathological bureaucratism to problems in the *Nomenklatura* system, and thus subsequently attempted to reform the system (Manion, 1985; Zhu, 2000). Since 1993, the civil service system has been officially introduced with the aim of replacing the *Nomenklatura* system. A series of rules and regulations were built up accordingly, forming a new hybrid of the cadre management system.

In addition to the institutionalization of the cadre management system the Party-state has always emphasized the role of political thought work although the official political ideology has become less and less popular.¹¹ In the reform era, national political thought work campaigns were, for instance, the Spiritual Pollution Elimination Campaign (*Qingchu Jinshen wuran yundong*; 清除精神污染運動) in 1983,¹² the Three Emphases Education (*Sanjiang jiaoyu*; 三講教育) in 1999¹³ and the Campaign to Maintain the Advanced Nature of Communist Party Members (*Baochi gongchan dangyuan xianjinxing jiaoyu huodong*; 保持共產黨員先進性教育活動) in 2005.¹⁴ The special leading team of the Central Communist Party's mass line educational practice (*Qunzong Luxian Jiaoyu Shijian Huodong*; 群眾路線教育實踐活動) was established on 18 June 2013.¹⁵ This suggests that Xi Jinping has continued to employ the Maoist indoctrination strategy that had a central prominence in the days of Maoist voluntarism before economic reform set in in the 1980s.¹⁶

Structure-oriented

The structure-oriented motivation and constraint emphasizes the external and objective factors to keep cadres' obligation and accountability. In other words, it stresses external incentives, such as rules and regulations. Several often used interchangeably in China studies scholarship.¹⁷ In 2005, the Civil Service Law in the People's Republic of China was officially promulgated to institutionalize the civil service reform that had commenced in 1993 in

⁹ "Political embeddedness" is the concept to explain how the Party-state integrates itself with the economic sector.

¹⁰ In this study, the structure-oriented approaches emphasize the external and objective factors that influence administrators' behaviour, and the agency-based approaches stress the internal and subjective dimensions that have an impact on administrators' behaviour.

¹¹ The main differences between cadre education and training and political thought work are (a) the work of cadre education and training is mainly in the charge of the Organization Department of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, and political thought work is mainly in the charge of the Propaganda Department of the Communist Party of China; and (b) the targets of cadre education and training are cadre groups, and the targets of political thought work are individuals in the national population.

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¹² <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E6%B8%85%E9%99%A4%E7%B2%BE%E7%A5%9E%E6%B1%A1%E6%9F%93%E8%BF%90%E5%8A%A8/5748871?fr=aladdin> (accessed September 22, 2021).

¹³ <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/33837/2535045.html> (accessed November 10, 2013).

¹⁴ <https://www.12371.cn/2012/10/29/ARTI1351464607598222.shtml> (accessed September 22, 2021).

¹⁵ <http://qzlx.people.com.cn/> (accessed November 10, 2012)

¹⁶ The Mass Line theory (*Qunzong luxian*, 群眾路線) was developed by Mao Zedong in 1929. The basic idea is to emphasize the important relationship between leaders and masses. For more information see Hammond (1978).

¹⁷ Chou (2008, p. 57) said: "Although the civil service system has been established for more than a decade at the national level, many state organs have not yet singled out the category of civil servants in compiling their statistics. They still adhere to the old practice of lumping the cadres in different state organs together, and used 'cadres' (*Gan Bu*) and 'officials' (*Guan Yuan*) more frequently than 'civil servants' (*Gong Wu Yuan*) in statistics and archives."

cadre management. In practice, various features of the pre-existing Soviet-style Nomenklatura system have been incorporated into the new management system. The resultant hybrid management framework includes the *Bianzhi* (*Established post*; 编制) System (1950), the Cadre Target-Based Responsible System (1986), Regulations of the Selection and Appointment Party and Government Leadership (2002, 2014, 2019),¹⁸ the CCP's Internal Supervision Regulations (2004, 2016),¹⁹ the CCP's Disciplinary Regulations (2004, 2015, 2018),²⁰ the Civil Service Law (2005, 2018).²¹ Studies on cadre management, which were completed during the 1980s and 1990s, focused mostly on the various institutional arrangements of appointment, promotion, transfer, and removal of the cadres. Along with further progress in economic transition, some scholars began to examine cadre management in local governments, including village cadre elections in the late 1990s. Since 1993, more studies have investigated the civil service reform.

The existing literature presents a mixed map with conflicting messages, especially regarding the effects of the cadre management system and the civil service reform. Some studies acknowledged the general improvement in cadres' educational level in more recent years, and that leading cadres were also getting younger (Brødsgaard & Chen, 2009; Burns, 2001, 2006; Chou, 2005, 2008; Zhu, 2000). Tsao and Worthley (1995), Tong et al. (1999), and Chan (2003), positively evaluated the civil service reform, which is described as likely the key to motivating and constraining cadres and thus to improving administrative efficiency and capacity. For example, Pavlicevic and Wang (2011, p. 450) argued, "the concept and practice of meritocracy still retain distinctly Chinese character but are being gradually transformed in response to the needs to recruit, retain, and promote competent officials who can deliver good governance."

Nonetheless, more commentators have pointed to the weakness of the hybrid cadre management system and the reform, in particular its ineffectiveness in motivating and constraining cadres to improve government performance. On the one hand, some scholars have demonstrated that the improvements of government performance were attributable to factors other than the cadre management system. Landry (2003, p. 52) examines how the CCP used the cadre management system to control municipal elites in post-Deng China and concludes that "the CCP may want to govern effectively, but the preponderance of the evidence suggests that other political motivations, such as the need to distribute political rewards to a greater share of secondary officials, shape the political careers of local elites much more powerfully than the regime's stated goals of improving local governance." Walder (2003) held a similar view, arguing that civil service capacity has improved "during the past ten years; however, these improvements may be explained by reasons other than the reforms, e.g., the improvements in China's system of education." Recently, Burns and Wang (2010, p.60) examined the performance of municipal environmental protection and education bureaus in Beijing, Ningbo and Changchun. They argued that civil service reform played some role in government performance; however, "leaders in the government and their clients identified political leadership and financial support as more important than civil service reform for explaining improved performance." On the other hand, some studies emphasized the negative aspects of cadre management reform. The institutionalization of the cadre management system brought stricter political control over cadres (Burns 2007, 2009; Brødsgaard, 2010; Chan & Suizhou, 2007; Edin, 2003). The tactics of stricter political control are centralizing leading cadres and decentralizing non-leading cadres (Edin, 2003), increasing administrative monitoring, political criterion of promotion (Burns, 2003), rotating cadres (Burns, 2009; Edin,

¹⁸ The regulations have been revised two time since they were released in 2002. For more information, see the website <http://news.haiwainet.cn/n/2019/0317/c3541083-31517703.html>

¹⁹ For more information, see the website <https://news.12371.cn/2016/11/02/ARTI1478087905680175.shtml> (accessed September 22, 2021)

²⁰ For more information, see the website <https://www.12371.cn/2018/08/27/ARTI1535321516261382.shtml> (accessed September 22, 2021)

²¹ For more information, see the website http://www.npc.gov.cn/zgrdw/npc/lfzt/rlyw/2018-12/29/content_2071578.htm (accessed September 22, 2021)

2003), and producing structural reform and formal reorganization (Chan, 2007), fiscal centralization and political recentralization (Oi et al., 2012).²²

However, the effect of cadre management reform, which should aim to improve administrative performance and good governance, is proven to be inefficient (Burns, 2001, 2007, 2010; Brødsgaard, 2002, 2010; Chan, 2004, 2007; Chow, 1991; Edin, 2003).²³ Some scholars argue that socioeconomic factors, such as environmental turbulence (Chow, 1991),²⁴ competing Chinese values (Aufrecht & Bun, 1995; Burns & Wang 2010),²⁵ money fetishism, ideological confusion and vacuum, and growing informal organizations (Ma, 1999),²⁶ as well as the negative side of economic reform (Zhu, 2000),²⁷ have led to cadres' unethical behaviors, which indirectly undermined the effectiveness of the cadre management system. Some studies observe the low quality of the practices of cadre management, for example, non-competitiveness of staffing (Burns 2007; Chow, 1991; Opper & Brehm 2007), the ambiguousness and localism of performance appraisal (Burns, 2007; Chou, 2004, 2005; Manion, 2004; Tong, Straussman & Broadnax, 1999), the low motivation provided by salary and compensation (Burns, 2003, 2007, 2009; Chou, 2003, 2008), the implementation of disparities between central and local government (Burns, 2007, 2009), the exacerbation of the incentives for opportunism and corruption (Burns, 1989, 2007; Cai, 2004; Sun, 2008).²⁸ Other research described the institutional conflicts. Firstly, the internal policy collision (*the internal aspects of the cadre management system*), the multiple but opposing functions of civil service reform (Burns, 2007),²⁹ embedded dilemmas of party rules and regulations (Gong, 2008),³⁰ ambiguous policies (Chou, 2005),³¹ the contradictory standards of cadre selection (Thøgersen, 2008; Zhang & Rozelle 1998),³² and the clash of the *Bianzhi*

²² For example, Chan (2007, p. 383) argued that “the 2005 reform formalized what had been a historical pattern — the Communist Party holds tight control over leadership change and management at various levels. The Civil Service Law has turned the Communist Party of China into a political institution that has become the source of both civil service empowerment and control.”

²³ For example, Brødsgaard (2002, p. 361) argued, “the Party is reluctant to allow the creation of better public administration at the expense of Party control.”

²⁴ Chow (1991, pp. 38-39) mentioned, “Environmental turbulence has undermined cadres' commitment to the public service [...] [T]he phenomenon of the lack of commitment will continue and the intended effects of the proposed civil service reform will be limited [...] [T]he implementation may be a political process.”

²⁵ Aufrecht and Bun (1995, p. 176) argued, “Three basic competing Chinese values — traditional Chinese culture, Socialism, development — form a map of forces and support which obstruct the implementation of civil service reform;” Burns and Wang (2010, p. 58) stated, “The impact of civil service reforms was undermined [...] by a failure to address elements of organization culture that have rewarded various forms of illegal behavior, such as corruption.”

²⁶ Ma (1999, p. 144) mentioned, “post-Mao China has witnessed a new cultural environment of ‘money fetishism,’ ideological confusion and vacuum, and growing informal organizations. Assisted by the lack of checks and balances, the new culture has made it very difficult to produce men of ethics in public administration.”

²⁷ Zhu (2000, p. 1944) argued, “the negative side of the economic reform has hindered the further development of professionalization. In particular, corruption and negligence of administrative ethics have undermined the new system.”

²⁸ Burns (2007) demonstrated that corruption exists in the procedures and practices of cadre management, such as staffing, performance appraisal, and promotion. Sun (2008, p. 61) argues that “despite meaningful reforms to improve cadre recruitment, especially through greater input and supervision from below, these reforms have not succeeded in fundamentally reshaping cadre incentives in the direction of accountability towards the below; rather, the reforms have in many ways exacerbated incentives for opportunism and maneuvering on the part of individual officials because of the constitutional design that predetermines party supremacy and a new recruitment system that emphasizes popular input and supervision.”

²⁹ Burns (2007, p. 77) said, “to simplify, it may perhaps be viewed as two systems: one that is relatively performance-oriented, selects ‘the best and brightest’ through competitive mechanisms, links rewards to performance, and does not tolerate indiscipline and corruption; and a second one that de facto operates as an employer of last resort, selects on the basis of many different criteria some of which may be irrelevant to the job, ties rewards to positions, and is characterized by relatively high levels of indiscipline and corruption.”

³⁰ Gong (2008, p. 149) considered, “the party's discipline inspection system leaves much to be desired in terms of its effectiveness in curbing corruption and other malpractices of party members, due to some embedded problems in its institutional design and policy capacity.”

³¹ Chou (2005, p. 54) argued, “the ambiguity of certain parts of the reform encouraged local innovation on the one hand. On the other hand, however, it aggravated the problems associated with reciprocity.”

³² For example, Thøgersen (2008, p. 422) said, “Cadre selection procedures are presently being reformed, but in two partly contradictory ways. Examinations and explicit demands to cadres' educational level point in the direction of a meritocratic system where township leaders are seen primarily as professionalized public servants [...] consultative elections and confidence votes, on the other hand, point towards a more politician-type official with public appeal and strong local connections.”

system and downsizing reform (Burns, 2001; Brødsgaard, 2010), cause the low effectiveness of the cadre management system. Secondly, some studies argue that the external institutional contradictions (*the external aspects of the cadre management system*), such as the conflictual policy context (Chou, 2004, 2005, 2008), continual conflict between the central agenda and local priorities (Chou, 2008),³³ and clashing policies (Burns, 2007; Burns & Wang, 2010; Chan & Gao, 2009),³⁴ lead to the low effectiveness.

Agency-oriented

The emphasis on agency-oriented motivation and constraint highlights cadres' internal and subjective motivation to be responsible; that is, to keep and enhance the cadre's agency through incentives from intrinsic sources, such as individual ideas, beliefs, values, and moral principles. Some studies have focused on the education and training of cadres when looking for sources that drive cadre, and government and party, performance. Broadly speaking, the education and training programs designed for cadres form part of the cadre management system. They differ from the aforementioned rules and regulations, however, in that an agency perspective, versus a structural one, is emphasized. The improvement to government performance hinges upon improvements to the internal and subjective capacities of government actors, that is, the cadres in the Chinese context.

On May 19, 1941, Mao Zedong launched the Yan'an Rectification Movement with the emphasis of transforming cadres through Marxist-Leninist ideology education. When starting economic reform, Deng Xiaoping further expounded the significance of the cadre's agency in the process of Socialist modernization and gradually built up a formal cadre education and training system. The words and expressions, "to transform cadres," is less and less used in current political propaganda, which has been replaced with "to enhance the quality of cadre" ever since Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening up. However, the basic principle is identical, that is, to transform the cadre's agency in order to keep their powerful revolutionary dedication and high-level political responsibility in different socialist stages. Overall, cadre education and training has two functions: to keep cadres' political loyalty through political indoctrination, and to enhance cadres' working capacity by providing them professional knowledge and skills. Two departments of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCCCP) and two organizations of the State Council (SC) operate cadre education and training: (a) the Central Organization Department (COD); (b) the Central Propaganda Department (CPD); (c) the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security (MHRSS); and (d) the State Administration of Civil Service (SACS). They carry out overall planning of national cadre education and training work, provide coordination services and supervise the work. The Central and State organs are responsible for educating and training the cadres in their *Tiao-tiao* system. Local party committees at all levels implement national policies and provide education and training for their cadres in accordance with the cadre management system.

The formal cadre education and training contains two fundamental approaches.³⁵ First is on-the-job indoctrination, including four methods: political study sessions and self-study, with the emphasis on studying the latest political thought, documents, and policies; democratic living meetings,³⁶ with the key feature of criticism

³³ Chou (2004, p. 210) mentioned, "The reform implementation generated a dynamic between central policymakers who sought to optimize economic rationality and local leaders who placed more emphasis on coping with the tensions arising from the implementation of the reform which threatened the common desire for organizational harmony. Although the Chinese government successfully established the reform setups, the ambiguous content of the reform and the conflictual context due to leader cadres' maneuver watered down the reform."

³⁴ According to Burns and Wang (2010, p. 58), "The impact of civil service reforms was undermined by clashes with other policies being implemented at the time." Chan and Gao (2009, p. 51) argued, "the implementation of performance measurement in local China leads to an accountability paradox, in which enhanced accountability tends to hinder the improvement of government productivity . . . the implementation of the Chinese target-based responsibility system risks boosting the short term accountability of public employees while undermining the long term productivity of government agencies."

³⁵ The methods of cadre education and training are general. Though the methods that belonged to the strategies of political propaganda, such as moral models or mass line style, are not formally written into the Provisional Regulations on Cadre Education and Training Work, the means and ends are same, that is, to keep cadres loyal to CCP.

³⁶ For more information, see the website: <http://qzlx.people.com.cn/n/2013/0828/c364565-22716371.html> (accessed May 23, 2010).

and self-criticism; individual consultation, a personal talk conducted by a high-level cadre to subordinates; and, moral models, to set up some morals, such as model workers, or excellent Party members, for cadres to learn their spirit. The second approach is off-the-job training, consisting of four methods: formal training in Party schools and administrative schools, including ideological education and professional skills and knowledge learning; “mass line style” experience, such as to work with peasants; “touch the base” training, when prospective high flyers or current leaders go to work in local or grass-root levels to mix with the masses and; learn the experience of others, through trips to other jurisdictions domestically or overseas.

Relatively few studies have directly and closely examined the role of cadre education and training as a key to improving cadre's agency and thus improving government performance in China. Some discussion on cadre education and training was one part of the analysis of the leadership changing process. The others are historical description of Maoist thought and political ideology in China. Moreover, the terms changed from political indoctrination during the Mao era to cadre education and training in the post-Mao era. In the 1950s, some scholars began to discuss cadre education and training in China. These earlier studies investigated the political role of cadre education in the Party-state governance in China. Chen (1951) depicts the main indoctrination and propaganda methods that Mao Zedong used to maintain morals and discipline within the party – political education, criticism and self-criticism, the literacy movement, new youth organizations –, and then concludes that these four methods are the methods for the CCP to win the support of the population. Similar to Chen, Steiner (1951) describes the political education for party cadres to demonstrate the role of the Chinese Communist Party in China. Vogel (1967) argues the CCP selected and trained cadres “from revolutionary to semi-bureaucrat” in the 1950s and 1960s. Schurmann (1968) depicts a general picture of political ideology propaganda, political education, and self-organization, which is the key approach the CCP uses to govern and control the country.

More recently, Lee (1991) depicts cadre staffing and training in China and argues that the Chinese regime's main cadre management task has changed from training revolutionary cadres to training economic development technicians. Liu (2001) reviews the history of the leadership training in China from the 1950s to the 1990s and interprets the significant role of leader training in the policy-making process and economic development after Mao. Since June 2006, when the Cadre Education and Training Regulations (Trial) was officially released, some scholars have investigated the institutional arrangements of cadre education and training. Shambaugh (2007) examines the scope, structure, and mechanisms of the Chinese Propaganda Department and positively assesses the overall strength and efficacy of the system in controlling most of the information and political education. Furthermore, he describes the Party School system as the main organization to educate and train the Chinese political elite and holds that Party School system plays an increasingly important role in the CCP's rebuilding efforts. Brady (2008) raises the idea of a new Chinese political paradigm – popular authoritarianism – by examining the development of the CCP propaganda system and thought work in China, including the structure, the types and channels, the leadership, the history of reforms, and the modernization. Guo and Shan (2009) interpret the structure of cadre education and training in local party schools, and the system of how a local party school operates within the CCP's control. Moreover, Brødsgaard and Gang (2009) argue that the CCP attempts to professionalize its civil servant because the curriculum of party and administration schools contained not only the ideological and political courses, but also professional and technical courses on political and legal systems, general development of science and technology, and so on.

A lot of research has demonstrated the political function of cadre education and training, but only a few scholars discussed the effects of cadre education and training either to transform cadres' ideology, morality, and working ethics or to improve cadres' working capacity of providing better public service. The existing studies indicate the low effectiveness of cadre education and training. In addition to Chou's (2005) positive assessment of

Shenzhen's cadre training plan.³⁷ Ch'i (2019) reviewed the regulation of cadre training by Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s. He argued that some issues are difficult to correct during the implementation process. For example, resources for cadre education and training were less available. The motivation of cadres was low and complex: some cadres felt that to be trained was a great loss of face, and some of them were afraid of losing their jobs during the training period. As a result, the regulation effect of cadre training is unsatisfactory. Guo and Shan (2009) put forward two critical problems and challenges for cadre education and training at the local level: the ossified curriculum and over bureaucratization of the party school system. Pieke (2009) examines the marketization and centralization of cadre education and training in China and points out two deleterious effects of the marketization of cadre training: the institutional integrity of local party schools was broken up by budget constraints and central policy; and the smaller local party schools lost their competitive power in the new market of cadre training, which highlights the ideological over professional skills compared to public universities and high-level party schools.

Political control vs. good governance

Scholars have argued that the cadre management system (i.e., the *Nomenklatura* system), as “a more muscular state hand on the levers of capitalism,”³⁸ and played a central role in the process of market-based economic transition under the continuing political dominance of the CCP (e.g., Brødsgaard 2010; Edin 2003; Huang 1996; Nathan & Gilley, 2003; Parish and Michelson, 1996; Peng, 2004; Perry and Heilmann, 2011; Shambaugh, 2008; Shevchenko, 2017; Walder, 1995, 2003).³⁹ However, its contribution to the creation of an efficient and clean party and government, and thus improving the performance of the Party-state, has attracted more skepticism. Burns (2007, p. 52) observes, for example, that “although the nomenklatura system has continued to be an effective mechanism to keep the CCP in power, as a mechanism for selecting competent officials and those loyal to the party as an institution, for much of the past 50 years the system has served neither the CCP nor the county particularly well.”

Others have claimed that administrative reforms, especially civil service reform, have had in fact had a relatively low impact on improving the capacity of the civil service and government performance (Brødsgaard, 2002; Burns, 2007; Chan & Gao, 2009; Ch'i, 2019; Chou, 2005, 2008; Chow, 1991; Zhu, 2000). Furthermore, as a smart political strategy, cadre education and training has been demonstrated to be largely ineffective (Hua & Yang, 2011; Pieke, 2009; Wilson & Xue, 2013). The problems, such as cadres' weak motivation to accept education and training, low quality of cadre education and training management, lack of educational resources and good lecturers, outdated curriculum, and an irrational training evaluation system, have suggested the ineffectiveness of cadres' education and training.⁴⁰

As a matter of fact, the Party-state has seen increasingly serious internal problems arising from the misbehaviors of its own members. Many cadres have been found to be corrupt and irresponsible (e.g., Bernstein & Lü, 2003; Gong, 1996; Lü, 2000; Wu, 2006; Zhu, 2015) and many policies that read well on paper have fallen flat during translation into practice (e.g., Edin, 2003; Zheng, Liu, & Bigsten, 2003). The forced demolition and relocation in many localities, and the anomalous co-existence between “a dictatorship of the law” and practicing lawlessness, for instance, have aroused frequent public outcries and protests (e.g., Chen, 2012; O'Brien & Li, 2006).

³⁷ Chou (2005, p. 44) argued, “the response from both participants and their agencies has been positive in Shenzhen, and the impact of the training is at least twofold: it sends a powerful message that Shenzhen officials take performance evaluation seriously; and it demonstrates that employees can be motivated through training to improve their job performance.”

³⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beijing_Consensus (accessed November 10, 2012).

³⁹ For example, Shevchenko (2004, p. 168) explains the CCP's organizational adaption to the market as, “By providing its agents powerful incentives to uphold the necessary degree of compliance with central policies, by limiting lucrative ‘easy avenues’ for profit-seeking and value-subtracting behavior, by preventing the formation of powerful interests capable of hijacking the reform process, and by imposing painful but necessary economic rationalization measures, the party became an imperfect but crucial substitute for the lack of institutions necessary to guide the process of creating markets.”

⁴⁰ According to a report in *People Daily*, some cadres accept training only because the training is a prerequisite for promotion. Some of them even want to lobby supervisors to raise their scores with less ink.

Ma (1996) summarizes the phenomena of cadres' unethical behavior as a behavior gap that runs against formal policy.⁴¹ With the progress of economic reform, the emerging norm of individualism originating from capitalist market logic is making the inculcation of collectivism in socialist bureaucratic logic an uphill battle (Zheng, 1994; 2001).⁴² How to bring about an adequate code of administrative ethics, and to make it effective in closing the gap poses serious challenges for the Chinese authorities (Ma, 1999; Zhu, 2000).⁴³

If the institutionalization of the cadre management system, which is the foremost rule and regulation on cadres, is proven to be ineffective to improve government performance, what else may better account for the historical changes in government actions? Which underlined the rapid economic growth, the significant changes to government institutions and policies, and the improvement in many aspects of human development over the past three decades? Chinese economic development has been inarguably rapid with an average rate of 9.7 percent per annum from 1978 to 2008.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the changes are not only in its economic aspects, but also in the institutional building, and the speed of institutional change is rare and unprecedented.

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⁴¹ Ma (1996, p. 7) defined behavior gap as "a term referring to a gulf between actual and desired bureaucratic behavior in the process of modernization as the bureaucrats are asked to manage reform."

⁴² Zheng (1994, p. 243) depicted that "Individual economic and political values are changing in contemporary China . . . Values are becoming more individualistic."

⁴³ For more discussion on administrative ethics in China, see Ma, S. K. (1996). *Administrative reform in post-Mao China: Efficiency or ethics*. University Press of America; Ma, S. K. (1999). Man of efficiency and man of ethics: Can China's administrative reform produce both for her economic development? *Policy Studies Review*, 16(2), 133-146; Zhu, Q. W. (2000). The process of professionalization and the rebuilding of administrative ethics in post-Mao China. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 23(11), 1943-1965.

⁴⁴ For more information, see the website: <https://data.stats.gov.cn/easyquery.htm?cn=C01> (accessed November 2, 2010).

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