

Governance and Public Administration in China

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Abstract

Pressing new (and old) challenges have put systems of governance and public administration under pressure around the globe. In this era, there is an ever greater need to globalise academic knowledge and learn from divergent systems. China has traditionally been held up as a *suis generis* exemplar of a particular mode of governance. An updated understanding of modern China and Chinese research on public administration stands to enrich the discipline by challenging old myths and assumptions – or by empirically demonstrating some enduring features. Given China's size and geopolitical significance, it is also an important focus of study. This article outlines the key features of the Chinese system of government, governance and public administration. It maps the contours of the evolution of the study of public administration in China from the start of the twentieth century to a more mature and globally connected discipline in the present day. It also summarises articles in this volume which shed new light on power, governance and public administration in modern China. They also provide new insights into governance and public administration theory. The volume shows that China has seen some localisation and decentralisation, alongside experiments with collaboration and networked based policy making. However, the system of governance and public administration remains innately top-down and centralised with the center holding strong policy levers and control over society. As the pandemic revealed, this statist approach provided both governing opportunities and disadvantages.

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1. Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic put governance structures and public administration systems around the globe in the spotlight and under strain. Decision-makers were required to make important decisions within short time frameworks which would have major consequences for the lives of their population. Meanwhile, public services were put under unprecedented demand. This was most obviously evident in hospitals and wider health care services which in many countries, had not had to previously operate in such emergency conditions, but also all of the public administration systems which undertook key roles such as procurement and human resource management.

Criticism of public administration systems can easily be overstated given the nature of the challenge, but initial assessments in many states were less than favourable. The President of the United States when the pandemic broke, Donald Trump, was found to have lacked presidential leadership, which left the United States in a position of failure, characterized by high case rates, deaths, and an ongoing inability to establish a basic national consensus on how to respond to the pandemic (Kapucu and Moynihan 2021). In the United Kingdom, it was argued that the UK system of governance had proved itself vulnerable with evidence of governance failure (Gaskell et al. 2020). Low-and-middle income countries (LMICs) found their health and broader governance systems under strain. With many countries relying on neglected and free-market national health systems, prices for precious health care resources rocketed leaving citizens exposed and without care (Williams 2020).

The direction of much governance and public administration reform around the world, especially since the 1980s, has been to follow the supposed virtues of new public management (hereafter 'NPM') (Hood 1991). This forged a new consensus about the mode of governance and public service delivery. Reganism and Thatcherism took hold on both sides of the Atlantic, but this was also embedded into narratives about good governance in organisations such as the International Monetary Fund (Woods 2000). These political movements encouraged a much smaller state and drastic privatisation reforms. They also created the space into which theories of public management became popularised. NPM encouraged a small state, privatisation, contracting out and a hollowed out state – with more actors involved in the provision of governance (rather than “government”). Policy networks were seen as the best way to describe the state, which had seen a switch from government to governance (Borzel 1998; Kriesi, Adam, and Jochum 2006; Koranteng and Larbi 2008). There have been movements to replace NPM in theoretical lenses and in practical terms. Scholars have looked to digital governance (Dunleavy and Margetts 2006). There have been new emphasises on collaborative governance (Ansell and Gash 2008). But many of the assumptions of NPM arguably remain embedded in much praxis of public administration.

While there is emerging evidence that democracies fared better in delivering covid outcomes (Karabulut et al. 2021), there is a strong case for reflecting more deeply at the systems of public administration that have been assembled around the world. Public administration has not always been strong at this. Civil servants and practitioners often draw from national experience or, at best, countries with the same native tongue. There has been reluctance – and an inability - to reach outside many national systems to identify what works. The British Prime Minister's most senior advisor during

the pandemic stated that Westminster had been “totally hostile to learning from east Asia” (Elgot 2021). The study of public administration as a discipline in many states has been argued to have taken a backburner and seen state disinvestment (Talbot 2020). One further contributing factor towards the intellectual problems may have been an Anglo-isation of public administration – and public administration research. English has dominated academic journal publications, especially those more highly ranked by indexes, giving authors in the Anglosphere a strong advantage (Gnutzmann 2008; Ramírez-Castañeda 2020). Textbooks therefore tend to provide and draw from case studies of public administration in English speaking nations, or written by authors in English speaking nations. Reading lists on postgraduate public policy modules, therefore commonly draw from the Anglosphere. This is all at the expense of the wider world and means that there are fewer lessons being drawn from Asia, Latin America and elsewhere. Public administration in non-democratic settings is especially overlooked. Given that 68% of the world lived in an autocracy in 2020 (Hellmeier et al. 2021, 7), this is a major problem for our understanding of how public administration works, especially as democratic erosion is thought to be spreading (Edgell et al. 2021; Mechkova, Lührmann, and Lindberg 2017). This is not to necessarily say that better practices lie elsewhere, especially in non-democratic settings, but that open exchanges of about practices of governance and public administration can facilitate better praxis and academic research.

This special issue therefore focuses on governance and public administration in China. Understanding governance and public administration in China is vitally important given the geographic size and importance that the country has in global politics and history. But it is also important in tracing how an archetypically different system of governance and public administration system, a much more statist system, functions to that which has been developed in much of the West but also the Global South.

Individually, the articles in the special issue make important contributions to public administration and governance research. They often do this by providing new empirical information about how China has responded to common problems such as covid. They also do this by testing whether theories that have been developed in Western democracies work elsewhere. In addition, they develop new concepts and approaches which may be applicable outside of China. Collectively, they demonstrate how public administration as an academic discipline and as an approach to governance has developed in China into the twenty-first century.

This introduction to the special issue begins by describing the system of governance and government in China in part II. Part III then provides a historiography of the development of public administration in China since 1900. Part IV then summarises the articles in the special issue ahead.

2. Governance, government and public administration in China

China is the world’s most populous country with more than 1.4 billion citizens and a geographical area covering 3.7 million square miles. There are no elections for national executive office or local government in China, but there are elections for local villages (O'Brien and Han 2009; Zhang, Chen, and Wang 2019; Wong, Tang, and Liu 2020). Since the reform and opening-up in 1978, decentralization has been demonstrated in the economic and public administrative spheres in China, even though it remains “politically authoritarian” (Landry 2008). There are five levels of governments in China’s multi-layered governance system: the central, province, municipality, county, and township. A fundamental governance structure at various hierarchies was established by the 4th Constitution of the People’s Republic of China released in 1982. At the national level, the National People’s Congress

and its Standing Committee exercise the highest legislative power, while the State Council with its ministries and commissions are the top executive body to administer public affairs. Similar governance framework and power division are stipulated at different levels of localities.

The “tiao-kuai” system describes a two-dimensional arrangement of the Chinese administration system, where “vertical” lines of functional agencies (tiao) reach down from ministries of the central government through a five-tier state structure, and “horizontal” threads of territorially-based government units (kuai) coordinate within localities that they govern (Lieberthal and Oksenberg 1988; Lieberthal 2004). Guangdong Provincial Development and Reform Commission (GPDRC), for example, needs to report its work to at least two immediate supervisors for whom it is responsible. The first is the National Development and Reform Commission in the same functional system but at an upper level of the territorial hierarchy; Guangdong Provincial Government at the same level of territorial unit is the second one, with GPDRC being one of its functional offices. Functional and territorial governments who share the same bureaucratic rank as ministers and provincial government for example, can not issue a binding order to each other. It has therefore long been challenging to coordinate two lines of authorities segmented by territory, by function, and by ranking (Lieberthal and Oksenberg 1988).

A integrated party-state hierarchy is one of the salient features of China’s administrative system, where the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) constitutes a nested hierarchy alongside the state administration and party committees occupy a leading position inside government bodies (Lieberthal 2004). The central authority is channelled by the CCP’s Politburo and its Standing Committee, which is constituted of seven top leaders of the state and ruled in collective leadership by a consensus decision-making (Lampton 2014). The Central Committee of CCP, as a core institution in the unified chain of command, is divided into an array of functional commissions and coordination committees in charge of economy and reform, organization and personnel, propaganda and communication, civilian coercive, military and security, and many other aspects of society (Lieberthal and Lampton 1992). The relationship between the CCP and the government is the one of principal-agent, in which the party sets directions and provides general guidelines as the principal, while the state bureaucracy formulate and implement specific policies as the agent. Personnel management is a carrot-and-stick of the CCP to steer the local party and states towards desired development objectives while maintaining organizational integrity (Landry 2008). An incentive mechanism for top performers has been well institutionalized, through which efficient, professional, and honest officials are selected and promoted by indicators such as economic growth as well as social and political stability within the territory under their jurisdictions. This centralized control of cadres’ careers has created a performance-based meritocracy polity in China (Bell 2016).

In contrast to an oversimplified image of centralized policy directives, the policy making process is often argued to be much more complicated and dynamic. Decision-making in China is characterized as a disjointed, protracted, and incremental process with state and non-state actors involved. It is fragmented over a honeycomb-like administrative system in which cross-level and cross-sectoral bureaucracies bargain and negotiate for their own interests in the policy battlefield. Due to a fragmented power structure that has historically possessed among competitive bureaucracies, policymaking becomes such a bargaining game that it is difficult to reach a consensus and compliance on priorities in operation (Lieberthal and Lampton 1992; Lieberthal and Oksenberg 1988). Moreover, local officials at each level are not “string dolls” that only implement policies from a top-down discipline; rather, they react as policy entrepreneurs who adopt new goals or alter policy instruments drawing from practical experience or policy experiments in specific local contexts. To this end, adaptive policies are initiated across the country to accommodate regional varieties and local

flexibilities. This experimentalist governance model embedded with nuanced central-local relations has been observed in many policy domains, such as rural health care (Wang 2009), urban housing (Mei and Liu 2014) and pension reforms (Zhu and Zhao 2021).

Not only is bureaucratic infighting present in the policy-making process, but a more participatory form of government has often been argued to have been incrementally developed with diverse stakeholders included. Public opinion has been invoked in the agenda-setting process since the late 1990s, and non-governmental organizations, mass media and the internet are playing a critically significant role to exert pressure on state-centric policies (Wang 2008). The Chinese government has been argued to have become gradually more responsive to public complaints on burning issues such as land expropriation and housing demolition (Heurlin 2016), and engaged with citizen demands in policy debates on large-scale hydropower infrastructure and environmental protection (Mertha 2009). Confronted with a constantly changing environment and a plural society, governing China has become more complex than ever before. Good governance capability by better enforcement of the rule of law, transparency, and accountability have become much prized to distribute limited resources, resolve various conflicts, and coordinate competing interests.

3. The development of study of public administration in China

Origins

The term “public administration” was imported into China from Japan in the early 1900s and the “Provisional Government Organization Act” of 1911 was the first governmental document which formally accepted the notion (Park, Mao, and Liu 2021a, 2021b). The teaching of public administration also started then. During the 1920s and 1930s, several books about public administration (for example, White (1926)) were translated into Chinese and the subject was introduced into the higher education curriculum as a subfield of political science (Yu, Rubin, and Wu 2012). In spite of the limited forerunners engaging in public administration research, a systematic study of public administration was developed in the late 1980s alongside China's government reforms (Liu and Li 2013; Zang and Chan 2020a).

In an analysis of the history of public administration research in China since the 1980s, scholars found that there were two main factors shaping the nature of the field: changing social surroundings and existing knowledge (Liu and Li 2013). While these two forces pushed the development of the discipline, they also represented two clients of public administration research: China's governments and other scholars of public administration. In addition to describing and explaining phenomena in public affairs, research proposed policy solutions and assisted governments in solving public problems. This made government a potential client. On the other hand, Chinese public administration scholars, like their peers in all other countries, were conducting research for the sake of the discipline. Their academic outputs therefore also contributed to knowledge accumulation and theoretical progress within the discipline. As China's public administration research developed, shaped by the driving forces of social surroundings and existing knowledge, its relationship with those two clients also changed.

Scholars have examined the state of China's public administration research periodically (Chow, Xiao, and Wen 2018; Mills and Nagel 1993; Lu and Chow 2008; Liu and Li 2013; Kim et al. 2019). The next section, provides a new perspective and reviews China's public administration research since 1980s till now. To review do this we take a functionalist perspective and ask the following questions: what are the big questions that China's public administration research focused on during this stage? How

do public administration scholars interact with governments and the international scholarly community? What functions did the public administration research play? How should we describe China's public administration research?

The formation of PA discipline (1980s to 1998)

When China gradually started its transition era in the early 1980s, public administration as a discipline was re-established in China. A workshop on public administration was organized by the Chinese Association of Political Science in 1982. The General Office of the State Council and the then Ministry of Labour held a joint seminar on public administration in 1984 to discuss the importance and necessity of research and training. The seminar also approved the proposal for a professional association. The following year, *China Public Administration* (CPA) published their first issue and later it became the most important academic journal in the field. In 1986, Renmin University of China established the Institute of Public Administration, the predecessor of the School of Public Administration and Policy (Zhang 1993). Two universities out of Beijing, Wuhan University and Zhengzhou University began to recruit undergraduate students in public administration in the same year (Yang 2018). With the establishment of professional association and teaching program, the publication of a professional journal and the gathering of a scholarly community, the discipline of public administration was revived.

However, the newly-revived public administration discipline during this stage was still weak, immature, and there was a lack of disciplinary consensus about public administration's ontology and methodology. Although teaching developed rapidly during this stage, it could not provide a solid theoretical foundation to support research. By reviewing the public administration research published before the new millennium, Zhang (1993) asserted that Chinese research had failed to develop Chinese theories. Zhang and Holzer (2001) claimed that this weakness was a result of scholars' inability to use sophisticated methods.

As a young and immature discipline, Chinese public administration research developed different relationships with its two clients. It contributed little to the global study of public administration due to its lack of research capability. Chinese scholars were therefore mostly learning from elsewhere in the world. Large volumes of Western books were translated into Chinese and many classical public administration theories were imported into China (Liu and Li 2013). China's research benefited from learning from the West. Firstly, through translation and importation, China's research established a connection with the global scholarly community, which further nurtured the development and internationalization of research in China (Zang and Chan 2020b; Yang 2018). Secondly, while the first generation of China's public administration scholars had varied academic backgrounds, the learning process accelerated the formation of the disciplinary consensus (Zhao 2008; Liu and Li 2013).

During this stage, China's academics were more of a coach than a consultant to the government. When China entered transition era, the government faced unprecedented challenges. To respond to these challenges, China's young discipline focused more on providing training programs to governmental officials (Zhao 2008). A National Administrative College was proposed in 1988 and formally established in 1994. Its function was to provide continued education to governmental officials. This was the first professional training institute of a public administration in China.

A separated identity: governmental consultant and marginalized knowledge producer (1998-2015)

In 1998, three universities were given the authority to grant public administration PhD degrees and this stimulated China's research. As human history entered a new century, China and the world all faced new changes. Domestically, the market economy in China had become relatively established and social problems such as enlarged income gaps and a deteriorated environment emerged. Internationally, globalization became an irresistible force reshaping China's relations with the world. These changes were totally new to China's practitioners. At this time, decision-makers started to depend heavily on the scholarly community for policy advice and consultancy. These demands boosted the development of public administration research, which finally became a true 'study of inquiry' (Liu and Li 2013).

Several research trends also emerged during this stage. By reviewing published articles in Chinese public administration journals from 1995 to 2011, Liu and Li (2013) found that civil service reforms, E-government, performance management, administrative reforms, public administration ethics, and social organizations were gaining more academic attention. Similarly, Kim et al (2019) analyzed articles discussing China's practices published in English-language public administration journals between 1996 and 2016 and found that local governments, institutional governance, performance management, economic development, and administrative reform were major themes. Other scholars also found that the quantity and quality of China's research increased steadily (Zhang et al. 2018).

As the research deepened, its relationship with the two clients also changed. With stronger research capability, China's public administration scholars began to play a larger role in practice. In addition to providing training program, some scholars directly engaged in practice by proposing policy suggestions, conducting policy or agency evaluations, or serving as policy analysts. The cooperation between scholars and governments benefited both sides. The scholars, regarded as an "external brain", provided useful information to the governmental organs and helped them practice good governance. The governments, by providing research funding and authentic data from real world, also nurtured research. This phenomenon has been described elsewhere as "expert involvement" (Zhu 2013a).

At the same time, the global trend of internationalization was diffused to China's public administration research and its connections with global scholarly community was strengthened. To be specific, more Western literatures were imported; communications between China and foreign scholars increased; cross-country collaboration was encouraged; and more Chinese scholars, under the support of the China Scholarship Council, paid visits to foreign universities or research institutes. All of these developments helped China's researchers integrate into the global discipline. The global scholarly community also developed stronger interests in China. China's governance problems were argued to be more worthy of studying in light of the rapid economic growth. However, although China, during this stage, became an important research context for social scientists, scholars focused on China's unique stories but failed to use Chinese stories to propose and develop general conceptual theories. Most English publications were descriptive or were essays telling the "here and now" narratives of events (Walker, Brewer, and Choi 2014; Chow, Xiao, and Wen 2018; Li and Zhang 2021). Although China's public administration research contributed to knowledge production of the discipline, its contribution was limited.

China's research, while serving the two clients, also presented different identities. When interacting with Chinese governments, it played a role as governmental consultant, focusing on local problems and involving in local practices. When collaborating with global community, China's public administration research, due to its "incapacity to use sophisticated methodology to develop theories"

(Chow, Xu, and Wen 2019), was a marginalized knowledge producer. More importantly, these two roles seemed separated to each other. Scholars used different languages and patterns to interact with the two clients and played the roles as governmental consultant and knowledge producer at the same time.

A new type think tank (2015 to now)

The development of public administration research has continued without any interruption in recent years. In 2015, a policy issued by China's central government brought more opportunities to the discipline. China called for the establishment of a new type of think tank to serve the government by promoting scientific and democratic decision making, promoting modernization of the country's governing system and ability, as well as strengthening China's soft power (Hayward 2018). Even before 2015, think tanks had been burgeoned in China, but they were mostly small collections of academics, working on the basis of a scholars' individual connections and capabilities. The "new-type" think tanks, continued to claim the advantage of "expert involvement", but also institutionalized these relationships. They no longer relied on scholar's individual influence, but they acted as a bridge, closely connecting the scholarly community with practice.

Since the 2010s, among public administration publications in both Chinese and English, the number of empirical articles far outweighed essays (Li and Zhang 2021). Both public management and public policy disciplines were a focus of concern for China scholars. Under the public management domain, topics including administrative reform, human resource management, participation and accountability, collaborative governance, performance management and non-profit management received relatively more attention. Special policy issues such as environmental policy, health policy, science and technology policy and social policy were research foci.

Under the title of new-type think tank, research's role as a governmental consultant was reinforced and such an involvement from expert agencies in the policy process even changed China's policy-making patterns (Li and Qi 2018). The deeper China's public administration research was involved in the policy process, the more resource and insights that scholars gained from their involvement in the real world of policy making and implementation. It was therefore not surprising that China's research also improved dramatically and began to make new theoretical contribution. Scholars began to contextualize their research and share China's story globally by integrating multiple theories to capture the multifaceted nature of phenomena under investigation, by highlighting both the common and unique characteristics across different Chinese contexts to identify common ground for theory testing and theory building, and by broadening theoretical discussion under China's multiple levels of units of analysis (Li and Zhang 2021).

In contrast to last stage, scholars could serve two clients under one identity—a think tank. Public administration scholars began to borrow cutting-edge theories to support their consultancy tasks and at the same time dig data from practice for theory building and testing. The two jobs are mutually supportive. Several think tanks, such as the Capital Development and Governance Institute affiliated to the Renmin University of China and Institute for Sustainable Development Goals of Tsinghua University, all gained reputation on both governmental consultancy and academic research.

4. This issue

This issue therefore seeks to continue to develop and advance the study of public administration in China with many new original research articles. These will advance our understanding of governance and public administration in China, but also the wider academic body of work on public administration.

Policy Studies aims to bring a broad approach to policy analysis that covers the power politics and governance that shapes policy, the public administration systems that deliver policy and what works in solving emerging and wicked policy problems (James 2021). These issues and the papers that form this special issue overlap, but they can broadly be mapped under these themes.

Power, Governance and Public Administration

As the start of this article noted, a common theme in many countries since the 1990s has been the move towards studying governance and policy networks rather than government, as a result of developments in the real world in which the range of actors involved in policy making was thought to have become more numerous and complex (Rhodes and Marsh 1992; Rhodes 2006). Collaborative governance has been encouraged to solve “wicked problems” (Ansell and Gash 2008). Has China seen such anti-statism movements, or is policy making top-down?

Huang et al. (2022) provide insights into how collaborative governance has worked in China with respect to environmental policy. They also claim that existing research has tended to focus on the formation of either formal or informal networks. Few studies, however, have examined the influence of formal networks on the formation of informal networks. Formal networks were defined as those comprising of public managers to deliver public services in which actors were forced to participate by nature of their organisational position. Informal networks were defined as those in which participation is voluntary and actors use tactics such as sharing ideas, knowledge and building trust. The authors explored the relationship between formal networks and informal networks by studying water governance in Dongguan city of the Guangdong province. They found strong evidence that nongovernmental actors were increasingly active in the policy sphere, but informal networks were dominated by governmental departments – and formal networks could profoundly the structure of informal networks. This suggests that hierarchical governance structures remain dominant – and the centralised Chinese state power remains considerable.

The attitudes and approaches of the employees of the state are important in shaping policy direction and implementation, it has long been argued. Scholars have therefore carefully studied the views of public servants within those institutions (Kassim et al. 2013). What are the attitudes of Chinese public sector employees towards new ways of delivering public services such as through contracting out, strategic partnerships, networks or in collaboration with civil society? Li and Qiu (2022) find that public employees in China have a strong preference for a top-down hierarchical approach and dislike co-production. This also supports the view that there is inbuilt resistance to change within public administration.

The relationship between local and central government is explored by Shen and Li (2022). How policies in different sectors are coordinated to deliver the centrally set policy goals is a central question for locating where power lies. They note that there has been a growing awareness of local policy variations in China, which has been claimed to indicate the entrepreneurial nature of local government (Zhu 2013b). Shen and Li (2022) therefore study whether local policies reflect central guidelines and how policies are co-ordinated locally by looking at the policies relating to the ‘talent war’ that has been taking place between Chinese cities. Municipal governments in four mega cities of Shanghai, Beijing, Shenzhen and Chongqing have combined migration policies with subsidised housing policies to improve economic development. They find that central government exercises strong power in intergovernmental relationships by being the unit to create and initiate policy, hold veto over local policy changes, set performance standards and set quotas. However, negative political consequences may emerge from central policies, which can make them unsustainable in the longer term.

Li, Liu, and Koppenjan (2022), meanwhile, examine the variations in the strategies that Chinese local governments used to address protests, using the case study of planning decisions. Local government responded differently to the protests, they show, but the key factor shaping this was the preference of higher government units and the national mass media. They draw from this that local government has relatively low autonomy and low ability to respond to democratic pressures from below. Again, this suggests that power resides higher up the institutional architecture.

The publication of the Government Annual Reports (GARs) marks an important point in the policy cycle. It is a moment during the “two sessions” (National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference) when the government seeks to deliver messages about achievements and sets the course for future policy, with new proposals and announcements being made. Little research has been undertaken, however, to see how effective the GAR is at communicating information the citizens. Yang and Zheng (2022) identify variations in citizens' objective awareness of the goals of central and local government, as stated in the GAR. Considerable variation is found. This is attributed in their analysis to factors such as the clarity, relevance and accessibility of the communication. Demographic factors such as gender, profession, age, and education were important. In addition, political embeddedness and psychological distance from the GAR were also important. For example, public servants and regular viewers of CCTV news had higher awareness of GARs.

Building on this, media coverage and the agenda-cycle of policy issues is a vitally important question for shaping policy. Meng and Fan (2022) note that theories of punctuated equilibrium have been widely used in democracies, but less so in countries which are not liberal democracies such as China. They therefore explored patterns in the attention cycle on the issue of e-government. The core of the punctuated equilibrium theory is that long periods of stasis with only small changes take place, which are then suddenly alternated by momentary and radical shifts in agenda setting. In their case study of e-government, they also find periods of stability and dramatic change, which constitute punctuated equilibrium. This pattern is described as leptokurtic, followed by a gradual decrease in the intensity of punctuations. Importantly, they argue that the attention allocation of the Chinese central government experiences higher levels of punctuation than that experienced in Western democracies, which they attribute to “the possible impacts of central coordination and civic participation that reduce disproportionate information processing” (p.17).

What works with wicked problems

Articles in this issue also then focus on solving wicked and important policy problems in China, within this context of power, governance and public administration.

Once central debate within public administration is whether “big” or “little” government produces better services for citizens. In the “big versus limited government” debate one side argues that it is necessary for government to remain small to enable space for market-based solutions to welfare; while the other stresses the importance of responding to market failures. Chen and Yang (2022) explored the relationship between government size and citizen satisfaction. This involved the use of government spending and employment statistics to measure government size and the Chinese General Social Survey to measure the latter. They find that higher government spending seems to increase satisfaction, but higher governmental employment levels decreases it. They infer from this that the data supports both contrasting views in the welfare state theory and the public choice school.

Yang, Xu, and Wilkinson (2022) consider social participation in China. In the Chinese context, this primarily means social interactions such as recreational or charitable activities and takes place in NGOs or non-profit organisations. It has been promoted by central and local governments, but Yang, Xu, and Wilkinson (2022) argue that this has been unsuccessful and a more effective approach would be to adopt a value-orientated approach that “consider participants’ interests and motivations and transform mobilization from an instrumental to a value-oriented process” (p.16).

Yang (2022) considers science-based policy. The case for the use of experts, scholars and scientists is often made in many policy areas. The article develops a framework for understanding the extent to which scientific applications are used – and their effects. Important factors are thought to include the biophysical conditions, the quality of science, and interaction with organisations and social actors. An empirical case study of desertification control in northern China is used, with data drawn from a mix of surveys, interviews and observations. A cubic rather than linear relationship was found, Yang argues, and the effects of the application of science are more complicated than is widely thought.

The extension of welfare programmes is considered by Huang and Han (2022). They note that many citizens have migrated from rural to urban China. They are not entitled to the same urban public services and goods as local urban residents, however, and this leads to extended poverty within the urban areas. Policies have been introduced to extend urban social insurance coverage to migrants in urban areas but participation rates have remained low. Huang and Han (2022) argue that this can be explained by the social construction of the target group. They contend that the stereotypes and negative attitudes toward construction workers has prevented policies being implemented successfully. Attitudinal change is therefore needed at the level of local government.

Last, but certainly not least, Covid-19 was one of the greatest challenges that modern states and public administration systems have had to respond to, as the start of this article pointed out. Covid was a transboundary crisis, crossing multiple policy areas, social systems and political-administrative territory. Cai, Jiang, and Tang (2022) examine how China constructed crisis governance systems to deal with the problem. They propose a new framework for conceptualising the approach as ‘a campaign-style crisis regime.’ Their concept comprised of two parts, drawing from theories of policy regimes and campaigns. The regime dimension refers to the ‘institutional structure and arrangements constructed in the process of transboundary crisis governance’ (p.3). These were top-down in nature with horizontal/vertical and formal/informal institutions playing a secondary role. Meanwhile, the campaign dimension ‘refers to the diverse political mechanisms constructed by the Party-state in a top-down manner to achieve a specific political goal at a specific time’ (p.3). Overall, the centralised system enabled the Party-state to communicate and reinforce the targets of epidemic prevention and control, direct political focus and make political commitments, they argue. Overall, the campaign-style crisis regime achieved some successes, but the conditions also led to problems, they argue. China’s governance structure did not foster bottom-up information transmission or the knowledge of professional communities and this prevented an adequate early-warning system. Non-party voices were drowned out. Mobilized departments and party cadres were not specialized and lacked adequate professional capabilities. Failures of the top-down approach also eroded the political legitimacy of professional institutions and local governments, they argue.

5. Conclusions

The world is living through an age of uncertainty (James 2021). New (and old) challenges such as the rapid spread of epidemiological diseases across borders, climate change, war, shifting global alliances, technological transformation and population movements have put systems of governance and public administration under pressure around the globe. They have fundamental consequences for the state,

governance and public administration. In this era, there is an ever greater need to globalise academic knowledge. Expanding our points of comparison is therefore ever more important. Understanding governance and public administration – and the development of the academy - in a state the size and global significance of China is therefore vitally important.

This article has therefore outlined the key features of the Chinese system of government, governance and public administration. It has mapped the contours of the evolution of the study of public administration in China from the start of the twentieth century to the present day. Articles in this special issue have shed new light on modern China and new insights into theory on governance and public administration.

China has seen some localisation and decentralisation, alongside some experiments with collaboration and networked based policy making. The system of governance and PA remains top-down and centralised, however, with the centre retaining considerable policy levers. This system holds some governing advantages for the people of China, as the management of the pandemic showed, but also some disadvantages as local and professional knowledge was overlooked and attempts to respond to the pandemic were therefore undermined.

Going forward, the study of Chinese public administration has the opportunity to continue to grow by better describing and analysing developments in China and finding ‘what works’ in solving policy problems. It can also be more ambitious, however, and continue to grow. It can seek to further develop work that tests, challenges, confirms or criticises theories and concepts that are used in the discipline, as it has done. There is also further scope for developing new theories which can then be tested back in other settings. Comparative work, which directly compares policy instruments in different countries, offers one crucial way to achieve this. Further investment in academic infrastructures to enable international exchanges of academics, students and ideas is therefore strongly encouraged. This involves the movement of scholars from China to other parts of the world, but also scholars from around the world to China.

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