
Book Reviews

An Important Book in the Study of Chinese Politics and Administration

Huiyan Wang, Jilin University

The division of power and authority between central and local governments has been a key issue about which many scholars have shown great concern. In political and administrative science, it is a theoretical and practical issue of great significance. Since the Third Plenary Meeting of the 11th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee, China has established and carried out a policy of reform and openness that has set China on the fast lane of economic growth and brought about great change. One of the most important components of the reforms of the political, administrative, and economic systems is the transfer of power to lower levels

Guili Buo, *The Relationship between Centralization and Decentralization and the Rise and Decline of a Country*. Economic Science Press, Beijing, 2001.

and the adjustment of authority relations between governments. In the 21st century, the development and perfection of the socialist market economic system requires further adjustment of power and a scientific, rational distribution of authority between central and local governments.

Further systematic research in this area is of great theoretical and practical significance.

Guili Buo has been engaged in the study of the relationship between the central government and localities for many years, and he has published many articles and works on that subject. In 1997, with support from the Fund for National Social Science of the Ninth Five-Year-Plan, Buo began extensive research on the division of power between the central government and localities during China's transitional period. *The Relationship between Centralization and Decentralization and the Rise and Decline of a*

Country (printed by the Economic and Scientific Publishing House in January 2001) is the ultimate fruit of the project. The major characteristics of this book can be summarized as follows.

Under the guidance of Marxist theory, and with close attention to history and reality, the book is a general and systematic analysis of the division of authority between the central government and localities. It puts forward many creative and revealing theoretical viewpoints. The book is rich and readable, based on a great amount of historical facts, written logically and with ease and grace.

It breaks the old disciplinary boundaries that have marked the study of central-local authority relations by adopting a multi-disciplinary perspective, using insights from economics, politics, administrative science, history, and cultural science. This broadens the scope of the research, deepens it theoretically, and makes it more systematic.

It puts the study of centralization and decentralization against the historical background of a country's rise and decline as well as against the process of a country's integration into the world. It is thus an organic combination of history with modernity.

It places equal emphasis on the theoretical study of the power division and on finding solutions to realistic problems. It is thus an organic combination of theory with reality.

It uses various approaches, such as case study, rational analysis, historical study and comparative study, which combine to help develop the analysis step by step, in-depth and in an extremely convincing manner.

The book has the following creative viewpoints.

It scientifically draws a line between a centralized system and a highly centralized power system, regarding the two systems as totally different ones by nature — the centralization system is the prerequisite of a democratic political system while a highly centralized power system is the key embodiment of a dictatorial system.

Historically, the coming into being of a highly cen-

tralized power system has its historical inevitability and plays an important role in stabilizing a nation. But in peaceful times, that system can conflict with social development and contribute directly to a country's decline.

Local governments' demand for administrative authority sometimes tends toward an extreme extent, resulting in over-decentralization. It is harmful to a nation's stability and utility, and it likely leads to its decline if it is practiced for a long period of time.

In the process of world modernization, clear-cut laws determine the power division between the central government and localities. In the initial stage of modernization, the predominant form is usually a highly centralized power system. In the stable developing stage of modernization, decentralization is on the horizon. In the period of modernization crisis, a highly centralized power system is overwhelming, with some countries even going to extremes. In the mature period of modernization, a highly centralized power system is replaced by rational decentralization.

The developmental changes in the power division between the central government and localities are not accidental, but rather have their historical inevitability. The geographical environment, political environment, historical traditions, political culture, economic structure, political structure, ethnic minority problems, and the level of scientific and technological development are major factors contributing to the form of power division between the central government and localities.

For some scholars and officials in China, misunderstandings exist regarding the value of decentralization as well as the content of local autonomy. To rationally divide responsibilities and powers, we must correct these misunderstandings. Based on Marxist theories as well as the theories of Deng Xiaoping, Guili Buo discusses the transfer of over-centralized power to lower levels and a scientific definition of local autonomy. He points out that the shift of power aims to allocate power resources rationally, to mobilize fully the initiative of people from all walks of life, to develop social productivity, and to achieve scientific and standardized administration. Under the socialist market economy and the democratic representative system, the fundamental meaning of local autonomy is the democratic rights of electorates, such as the rights to elect, super-

wise, and dismiss officials.

To divide duties and powers between governments scientifically and rationally, we must organically combine the vertical power allocation with a proper horizontal power structure. The overall power structure must be aligned with the demands of the socialist market economy and the development of democratic politics. This is key to achieving a balance between the potential chaos of decentralization and the potential lifelessness of centralization.

The author's surveys and studies of other nations helps shed light on establishing a rational power division system with Chinese characteristics (i.e., that fits the socialist market economy and meets the demands of democratic politics). Buo suggests the following:

- adjust the division of administrative regions
- increase the numbers of provinces and minimize provincial territories
- reduce administrative levels
- allocate rationally administrative functions of the central government and localities according to the requirements of the society in transition
- cater to the demands of the development of the socialist market economy and those of the construction of democratic politics
- transfer gradually from local decentralization to equal power at localities
- reform the cadre personnel systems to guarantee citizens' rights to elect local officials
- realize a democratic, scientific and legal personnel administration relating to public servants, establish a rational system for expressing and balancing local interests
- integrate the relationship between the central government and localities into a legal framework
- reform and improve the power supervision system, strengthen supervision and checks over power.

All told, the book *The Relationship between Centralization and Decentralization and the Rise and Decline of a Country*, is a creative work regarding some frontier issues of Chinese political science and administrative science. Of the viewpoints and elaboration put forward in the book, many are of high academic value as well as practical value.

Yet the book still leaves something to be clarified when it mentions the specific power division between the central government and localities in China, such as responsibilities for office, decision making, financial affairs, and personnel administration. Hence further studies need to be made. It hardly touches on the topic of how to divide and balance the power of local governments below the provincial level. This is an area where further research in general is needed.



Huiyan Wang is a professor in the School of Administration, Jilin University. He is a vice president of the Chinese Public Administration Society and he is also the vice president of the Chinese Political Science Society.