Disciplinary Rationale and Public Administration Field Development

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Academic public administration programs started to appear on China's university campuses in the 1990s, a number of years after the departments of sociology, law, and political science had been restored. Although late coming, these public administration programs have quickly moved into a spotlight position, not so much because of the public administration programs' academic strengths but because of China's urgent need for managerial-capacity building. Indeed, reform in China has reached the point where profound social changes are on the horizon. Changes of such scope and magnitude inevitably call for vision, leadership, theoretical guidance, and massive development of managerial capacity. Academic public administration programs are being created to meet these needs. Their formation at this historical juncture can truly be described by the currently popular cliché—moving with the times.

Under the glorious aura of the spotlight, there is also an enormous amount of pressure on the leaders of China's public administration programs. How should they define the mission of the new Chinese discipline of public administration? How should they organize their curriculum and research agenda? And how can they operate their training programs to fulfill the discipline's social responsibilities? These are urgent questions that China's public administration scholars have to answer. If these questions are answered well, the field of public administration will grow, prosper, and make great contributions to China's development and modernization. Otherwise, the currently glorious aura could quickly fade into oblivion, and public administration's important disciplinary function will be left to opportunistic currents.

This paper addresses some basic questions related to China's public administration field development. It examines the core rationale of public administration, in the context of the rationales of its social science sister disciplines. It looks into China's public administration environment, and examines experiences from outside of China. Hopefully, these discussions will lead to further research in these matters and serve as a reference for China's public administration field development.

The Core Rationale of the Public Administration Discipline

What is public administration? This question has been on the minds of China's public administration scholars for some time. I remember a well-known Chinese scholar of international politics venturing into the field of public administration over ten years ago—he had already authored one of the first few public administration books at that time—asking me (a doctoral candidate in Public Administration studying at a university in the U.S.), "What is this thing called public administration? What does it do?" In the same fashion, about eight years later when more Chinese students were studying public administration both domestically and abroad, the parent of a Chinese student studying with me in the U.S. posed the question, "What is public

Abstract: Public Administration as a field of study is relatively new in the People's Republic of China. Nonetheless, it is quickly gaining popularity on China's university campuses, due largely to China's urgent need for managerial capacity building and reform guidance. Properly defining the mission of the discipline of public administration will have a profound impact on the future viability of the field, as well as on the process of social transformation in China. This paper looks into some of the basic questions related to public administration field development in China. Hopefully, it can contribute to discussions among interested scholars, and serve as a reference for public administration curriculum design and research agenda setting.
administration?” and “What can my daughter do after she gets an MPA?” Even today, after Chinese scholars have published over a hundred books on public administration, some of the most prominent scholars still assert that the best way to understand public administration may be to translate books and articles on public administration published in the west.

Interestingly enough, the debates, on what public administration is and what public administration teaching and research should be, persist even in the United States, a country whose intellectual awareness of public administration can easily be traced back more than a hundred years (the passage of the Pendleton Act of 1883 and the publication of Wilson’s article The Study of Administration from the Political Science Quarterly in June 1887, for example). Although the National Association of Schools of Public Policy and Administration (NASPPA) established specific curriculum guidelines for the core courses of public administration programs in the United States, terms such as “intellectual crisis of public administration,” “proactive public administration,” “new public management,” and “new public service” have repeatedly surfaced in recent years (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000; Marini, 1971; Osborne & Gaeble, 1992; Osborne & Plastick, 1997; Ostrom, 1973), fighting to redefine the mission of the field. No wonder well-known American public administration scholars ask themselves questions, such as: “Do we have a paradigm governing public administration research?” “How important is it that we have one?” “Are we making progress toward one?” and “Which is the most promising?” (Lan & Anders, 2000; Rainey, 1994).

In reality, there is no lack of definitions for public administration. Some scholars define public administration as “the executive branch of the government.” Others call public administration “the action part of the government, the means by which the purposes and goals of government are realized,” and still others regard public administration as a tool “that is mainly concerned with the means for implementing political values....It differs from political science in its emphasis on bureaucratic structure and behavior and its methodologies” (Stillman, 1987). Perhaps the most compelling definition comes from Waldo, who observed that, “Public administration is a technology for human cooperation. It emphasizes rationality, organization, and management in the pursuit of cooperation. It is embedded in human cultures and is a means by which societies try to control their culture, by which they seek simultaneously to achieve ... the goals of stability and the goals of change” (Waldo, 1955; see also Rosenbloom, Goldman, & Ingraham, 1994, p. 1).

These definitions all point in one direction, the active nature of the field of public administration. Clearly, the essence of the field does not lie in the definitions, but in how these definitions are understood and used to govern public administration teaching and research. To illustrate this point, we could start by examining the broader academic environment in which the field of public administration functions, namely, the core rationales of public administration’s sister disciplines.

I first proposed this core rationale approach in a lecture I delivered in the summer of 1997 at Beijing University’s China Center for Economic Studies, for the sake of clarifying the relationship between public administration and its social science sister disciplines. The following is a summary of the approach developed in that paper.

As we know, the central problem in economics as a discipline is the question of optimality. It deals with the material basis of our social lives, and is a field closely related to management sciences. Economists assume resource scarcity and are dedicated to optimizing resource allocation to maximize the return on capital, labor, and technology. After years of trial, experiment, and observation, economists agreed that “true optimality” and “maximizing” are impractical Utopian concepts. Instead, they have accepted the notion of satisfying, a largely managerial notion. This is why economics is often referred to as economic management. Some economists have even abstracted the core issues of economics to the level of general decision-making or institutional building. Nonetheless, the core disciplinary rationale for economics is none other than how to optimize the use of resources to achieve high returns under given constraints. How to overcome various barriers and limitations (be they political, social, or managerial), in order to achieve optimization, is an issue that typically lies beyond the core mission of the discipline of economics.

In reality, the models of econometrics and predictions become less viable as more intervening variables related to social limitations are factored in. This is also why more recent landmark economic achievements have dealt with demonstrating how traditional economic theories do not work. For example, expectation theories (wherein human responses change an economic model’s prediction), institutional theories (in which managerial environment is regarded as important to economic outcomes), welfare economics (humanistic economics), liberal economics (a political justification, rather than an efficiency justification, of economic freedom), and game theory (Nash
equilibrium) were among the recent contributions that won Nobel Prizes for economics. Many economists are moving to deal with political, social, and management issues, areas in which most of them were not adequately trained. Even for some Nobel Prize laureates, what they have proven may just be the conventional wisdoms that political or social philosophers have had all along.

The core rationale in political studies has to do with “who gets what and how.” It studies the operation of political power, political behavior, political institutions, and issues related to political ideology, political processes, and political outcomes. It aims to identify robust political ideologies and recognizes the naked facts of political reality.

The sociological rationale, however, often has to do with concern for social norms and the behavior of different social groups and systems. It broadly covers areas in culture, customs, equity, and religious beliefs, and their evolution, preservation, and implications in social life. Community, humanity, and social harmony are regarded as desirable social objectives, since they have proven to be positive forces in preserving human society.

The legal perspective has to do with conformity to existing laws and legal precedence. The emphasis is on what has been there in the past and what impact it has had. The psychological rationale has to do with how people feel. Finally, geography and environmental studies deal with the physical space in which we live.

The management rationale, however, builds upon all the aforementioned disciplines. It is concerned with coordinating the collective efforts of human organizations to achieve management objectives—regardless of what these objectives are. When applied in the sphere of governance, the managing of society as a whole, it is called public administration. Public administration advocates the economic concern for efficiency and effectiveness, takes into consideration political concern for power and wealth distribution, the sociological understanding of equity and community perceptions, the psychological perspective on feelings, and operating with a bottom line of feasibility, equilibrium, stability, and social well being. Since different societies at different historical moments have different social objectives, the objectives of their management rationales also differ (Lan, 2000). How these different rationales work in a decision-making scenario can be illustrated with the following example.

As we know, among the many public-policy choices countries may have to deal with is that of their industrial policies. If a nation’s central focus is maximizing return on investment, it does not matter what the nation’s manufacturers produce. It could be television sets, automobiles, housing, or any type of service, depending on the availability of capital, labor, technology, and profit margin. Additionally, there is no need for any industrial policy, per se. For a developing country, in which capital is scarce and labor skills are low, the industries that are the least capital intensive and fastest in generating monetary return are the light industrial and service industries. Obviously, if there should be industrial policies, the light industrial and service industries would receive all the policy favors, if the decision was made based on the economic rationale alone. However, from the perspectives of national sovereignty, defense, pride, science and technology-capacity building, and high-tech skill maintenance, a portion of the capital has to be invested in capital-intensive industries, even with full knowledge that these products may not be competitive and that the risk for capital loss is high. Decisions such as this are obviously decisions based on a political rationale, which needs a what and when.

Expanding this example even further, if a technology could be adopted that employs a small percentage of the population and produces all the needed goods and services, should the technology be adopted immediately? The political rationale would be concerned with those who would lose their jobs as a result of the new technology. The social perspective would be concerned with whether it is morally acceptable (right or wrong) for a group of people to lose their jobs and live in poverty and humiliation, or what types of social welfare programs should be in place to help them get back on their feet again. While the economic outlook would justify the decision, based on whether it would lead to economic-outcome maximization.

Traditional economic theory argues that, as long as profit can be maximized, distribution should not be a concern because, after a period of time, wealth would trickle down and everyone would be better off. The counter argument is “before long, we are all dead” (meaning that people can not survive long enough for the benefits to trickle down). Many contemporary economists modified their trickle-down theory, based on the outcome of economic practice and social theories on justice, humanity, and compassion. They advocated a Pareto optimum: an optimal allocation decision point should be where some people are better off and no one is worse off. However, from a psychological perspective, one person’s gain is another’s loss, regardless of whether that gain has come from an enlarged pie. For, poverty is a relative concept, especially when those who did not experience the gain were not given equal opportunities.

No social changes can be made without causing disturbances to the status quo. To what extent can
society progress within the confines of compassion? Can continued innovation and competition be guaranteed? Can opportunities be ensured for the disadvantaged after the redistribution of wealth and power? These depend heavily upon the philosophy, the art, the skills, and the capacity of society's managers. This is exactly where public administration comes in. Public administration uses a multi-rationale approach to search for equilibrium, change that leads to a new level of stability. It takes into consideration the social forces at play, the change imperative, and the new achievements made in other disciplines, then translates them into social and governance action through institutional design, human and financial resource allocation, and technology application. A short definition describing the public management rationale might be "machinery coordinating human efforts to achieve socially acceptable human objectives". It is social engineering.

Laissez faire economists are against control and social engineering, considering it a socialist product. Nonetheless, the market itself is a controlling mechanism (Lowi, 1969; Smith, 1937). Also, hundreds of years of capitalist practice have shown that as the market forces (industrial and financial entities) grow, market woes—such as monopoly, negative externalities, inadequate provision of public goods, mis- or asymmetric information, transaction-cost barriers, and so forth—also grow in impact and impede the healthy operation of the market. The fact that successful capitalism has moved from traditional (primitive peddler's) capitalism through industrial and financial means to today's close-to-rationalist capitalism is the strongest evidence that complete laissez faire did not work, especially in eras using extensive modern technology. The recent U.S. corporate scandals (Enron, Worldcom, Tyco International, Global Crossing, Xerox, and such) are more footnotes to this century-long wisdom. The real question, therefore, is to what extent should social engineering take place and how? This is a question public administration and management scholars have to answer.

It is no coincidence that many of China's leaders have had engineering degrees. For one thing, social scientists were more or less suppressed during the past 50 years; for another, engineering is a process that combines human and financial resources, materials, and technology expertise to achieve project objectives. It is, in essence, a quasi-management degree. However, in the discipline of public administration, more extensive societal issues—such as culture, political history, international environment, social tolerance, state capacity, and so on—have to be considered. Given China's lack of a comprehensive, modern, managerial-capacity-building discipline in the past, engineering was perhaps its closest disciplinary sibling, until in the late 1980s when departments of economics started to flourish. Now that public administration departments are being built, should they excel in curriculum design and research agenda setting and satisfactorily fulfill public administration's disciplinary mandates, many of China's future leaders could be expected to come from China's public administration programs.

**Interdisciplinary Competition and the Methods of Human Coordination**

When discussions have come this far, it should be noted that while disciplinary rationalities are what divide academic disciplines in their pursuit of specialization, they do not necessarily confine what scholars in different disciplines do in their scholarship. In our modern times, because of the influence of system theory, interdisciplinary studies are becoming the norm. Enlightened disciplinary leaders are quick to recognize their disciplinary limitations in resolving social problems. They freely borrow concepts, theories, and methods developed in other disciplines, to advance their research or simply venture outside of their own disciplinary boundaries (consciously or unconsciously) to study issues not traditionally within their field. The extensive use of mathematical methods in economics, the use of statistical methods in political science, sociology and other social-science disciplines, the cross-disciplinary programs (such as biochemistry, geophysics, and so forth) are telling examples of these trends. The complexities of the modern world and the achievements made in varying fields are the driving forces for these interdisciplinary efforts.

In fact, many social issues are, by nature, intertwined. It would be hard to say which discipline should be authorized to study what. The *Wealth of the Nations*, for example, is at the same time a classic for students of political science, economics, and public administration. Herbert Simon, a political scientist by training (Ph.D., 1943 University of Chicago), has conducted research work cutting across fields from computer science to psychology, administration to economics, and philosophy. His latest university position is the Richard King Mellon University Professor of Computer Science and Psychology, and is a member of the Departments of Philosophy, Social and Decision Sciences, and the Graduate School of Industrial Administration. He won the Nobel Prize in economics for his theory on decision-making, which in essence informed
economists that their hundred-year-old optimality rationale does not work.

In a way, academic disciplines are human divisions necessary to overcome human limitations in solving the problems they face in the complex world, where no disciplinary boundaries exist. This academic division of labor encourages specialization and focused efforts on issues of social concern. Public administration grew out of the necessities of modern complexity and is designated as a discipline to help translate discoveries from various fields into action. It is, by definition, an interdisciplinary field. If public administration programs could not properly fulfill their expected roles, their functions could be displaced by other academic disciplines, such as law, political science, economics, sociology, engineering, or any discipline whose leaders are constantly pressing the boundaries of their fields and looking for chances to expand their work. In this sense, academic disciplines cooperate, as well as compete. Public administration scholars could not take it for granted that they are the only ones doing what they are supposed to do. They are challenged to build a strong, academic program that can surpass traditional academic programs in implementing change and maintaining stability. The field needs a strong intellectual core that can attract an enduring group of disciplinary followers. In the following section, I shall discuss what I view as the intellectual core of public administration, methods of coordination.

Throughout the history of human civilization, three important methods of coordination have been invented. These inventions have made divisions of labor possible, and greatly enhanced the efficiency and effectiveness of human cooperation. In this sense, perhaps no other scientific discoveries can rival the achievements of these inventions.

One method is known as the market mechanism, through which market forces act as invisible hands to facilitate exchange, promote production, stipulate regulations on behavior, and provide incentives for skill, hard-work, and dexterity. The basis of market operation is monetary exchange. This method, though it has many desirable features, also has its defects, the market failures we understand so well today.

The second method is known as the bureaucratic–administrative method. The basis for this method is trust and political authority enforced through leadership charisma, contracts, laws and regulations, or hereditary–traditional power. When those being led have trust in their leaders and possess legally guaranteed rights and access to their deserved returns, they will comply with the directives of the authority, without bargaining for details of the exchange for each task they perform. This way, many intermediate transactions do not need to be measured, calculated in details and recorded (e.g., how much is paying a state visit to a neighboring country worth and how much should each person involved in the visit be paid). Through division of labor, a system of hierarchy, unity of commands, specialization, rules and regulations, written records, salaried personnel, and so forth, large-scale human coordination can be achieved with minimal transaction costs. All governments and large corporations depend heavily upon this management mechanism; however, it has defects of its own—monopolistic decision-making with no public inputs, misinformation or biased information input for decision-making, interest-group manipulation, insensitivity to the ratio of cost over returns, bureaucratic red-tape, short-term oriented political behavior, corruption, and such. These defects can be labeled as government failures, and the impact of these failures is much more socially extensive than the market failures, which are generally smaller in scale in comparative terms.

The third method for managing coordination is known as ideology inculcation. Through cultural and media influence, customs and rituals, value inculcation (or brainwashing efforts), shared consensus—or a value system within a community, social group, organization, or a nation—can be established. The Confucian values, the new Protestant spirit, various organizational cultures, nationalism, or internationalism, are all examples. This method is extremely effective when successful, since those being led will self-consciously abide by the established norms and behave accordingly. Additionally, material incentives or legal penalties can be reduced to a minimum. The weakness of this approach is that it takes a long time for a value system to formulate. The value system needs to be constantly reinforced, and is not successful with everyone. Therefore, no administrative system can depend solely upon value inculcation. More negatively, it has a powerful lagging effect, which means if a change is desirable or necessary, the already formulated value system often works against change; it dies hard. A minimum of twenty to thirty years (an effective generation) is often needed for any sensible change of mentality to form a momentum. Human society owes its survival and prosperity to its ability to adapt and change. Overuse of ideological inculcation can prove to be very costly and, at times, fatal.

The three methods each have strengths and weaknesses; however, they complement with and offer an alternative to one another. They are used extensively in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors, to varying extents, with the government sector placing more emphasis on bureaucratic–administrative method. These methods differ in
importance in our social life as well. For example, while a society without market and ideology is bound to be a low-efficiency society, no large-scale society can function without administrative authority. A successful society is one that achieves a reasonable balance among the three. Only when that happens can human civilizations flourish. This is why Waldo said public administration "frames civilization, gives it a foundation, provides a stage" (Waldo, 1980, p. 18).

Throughout human history, East and West alike, all the great civilizations were invariably associated with strong public administration. When administrative infrastructure collapsed and administrative direction weakened, societies were left to chancy currents and the latter of that civilization faded. Therefore, the central task of the public administration field is to study, refine, implement, and evaluate these coordination methods under different task environments and management scenarios.

The Relevance of U.S. Experiences to China's Public Administration-field Development

I do not plan to go into detail here. My distinguished colleagues from the United States can share their perceptions on this with you, but I would like quickly to mention a few points.

First, just as China's public administration program is a product of reform, the U.S. public administration program is a product of the progressive movement that occurred towards the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, which emphasized science, reform, and the good life. As a discipline, public administration is intrinsically connected to reform. Interestingly enough, among its theoretical pioneers were corporate leaders and engineers (such as Chester Bernard and Frederick Taylor), as well as political scientists (such as Woodrow Wilson and Frank Goodnow).

Second, early U.S. public administration was also a hybrid with a strong foreign imprint. While domestic momentum for change and reform is a significant catalyst in the national mood to look abroad for lessons and experiences, the availability of outside experiences itself is a significant factor. During the progressive era, many U.S. scholars, including Wilson himself, were excited and influenced by German achievements in administration, science, and industrial prosperity. They borrowed German from experiences with enthusiasm, and worked hard to transplant many of them on U.S. soil. This was a tremendous help in an age of great reforms.

Thirdly, the United States is a large, developed country with a huge administrative system and diversified modes of practice. Its system is the closest to that of China's in size and variability. As organizational theorists have repeatedly learned when studying human coordination, size is a constantly significant variable. In this sense alone, U.S. public administration methods could be an important source of reference for Chinese public administration.

In terms of impact, U.S. public administration (including business-management practices), has contributed greatly to the stability and long-term prosperity of the United States. The emphasis on science and management has provided a buffer to ease the sharpened social conflicts between capitalists and the working class during America's period of industrialization, by advocating the win-win strategy in productivity improvement (scientific methods). They have reduced irregular political influences, fought against corruption, and facilitated building a strong executive branch. This eventually saved American capitalism, by easing the aftermaths of economic crises, speeding up social acceptance of diversity and equality, and waging wars on poverty. Also, the rapid growth of public administration programs throughout the United States has helped to build strong managerial capacities at the state and local government level, the mainstay of American civic life. Many outstanding management innovations nowadays come not from the federal government or businesses, but from state and local government entities (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992).

In recent decades, U.S. public administration has started suffering from its lack of research and academic leadership. Since the field started by emphasizing practice, it overlooked the necessity of cultivating basic in-house research and theory development. As the first generation of academic leaders (such as Charles Merriam, Louis Brownlow, Luther Gulick, Dwight Waldo, and Herbert Simon) faded into the background with age (Shafritz & Hyde, 1991), the next generation of public administration scholars found it hard to gain the same level of reputation, influence, and national visibility as their predecessors. This is, perhaps, due both to their focus on more specialized areas—such as science policy, constitutional law, organizational behavior, human-resources management, management ethics, or performance measurements—and the lack of need for them to reach out to other professional societies to fight for recognition. There are extremely bright and skilled individuals working in the field, but since not many of them view field development as their main calling, few have engaged in extensive theoretical work that deals with general theories concerning society—as a whole. Some have had great ideas, but
not enough efforts have been made to popularize those ideas among the general public.

This lack of basic research and theoretical strength could be partly responsible for the setback in public administration, since the Reagan Reform in the 1980s. Throughout the decades-long massive reform, public administration theorists failed to play a significant role until after Clinton’s “reinventing the government.” The theoretical thrust behind the Reagan Reform was one that grew out of the basic economic thinking of the early sixties, the public choice theory which used the economic rationale to interpret constitutional and managerial behavior. Although theoretically flawed and practically incomprehensible in explaining governmental behaviors, the lack of a better theory or lack of a more powerful theoretical challenge, made it the crown jewel as reform was begetting theoretical guidance. As a result, massive bureaucratic bashing, hollowed governmental spending, demoralized public employees, irresponsible public-budgeting behaviors, decreased governmental service capacity, misguided public sentiment, and so on, were the melody throughout reform in the United States. The tone was so negative that public trust in, and public support for, the government ebbed to a historical low (Palmer, 1994).

When the Clinton-Gore Administration came into the White House, they were badly in need of reform theories. What they found was the poorly hatched “reinventing theories,” which was a rough mix of the decades-old scientific-management principles with sporadic ideas about public choice. Theoretical loopholes in the reinvention literature left reinventors no choice other than reinventing the theory of reinvention (Lan, 1995).

Moving into the 1990s and the twenty-first century, the sporadic success rate from the privatization reforms in many countries started to reveal that privatization could be a double-edged sword that should be exercised with care. Scholarly work started to appear, making a case for the value of public service. The 9/11-terrorist incident was a wakeup call to the American public that important governmental functions could not be displaced. With more public administration scholars starting to engage in discourse on the issue of governance, a new generation of public administration leaders is in the making.

One significant lesson to be learned by China’s public administration scholars from American experiences is the importance of theory development. The basic studies of public administration should go beyond the foci of organizational, human resources, financial, material, and information-resources management. It should encourage using economic, political, or psychological methods to study the basic questions of management and administration. It should also work to perfect management rationality and methods, so that they can be used to study politics, economics, and psychological and social phenomena. Often, there are discussions among political scientists about the right-wing or left-wing view of a political ideology. For public administration scholars, “whichever cat that catches the mouse is the good cat” (Deng Xiaoping’s well-known saying). And at different times, or even at the same time but in different locations, that mouse can signify something different, economic prosperity or individual freedom. Public administration theorists should help determine what those mice are, through their well-designed measurement system throughout the process of policy implementation.

Indeed, diverse but basic research is what truly strengthens the discipline. When themes and methods developed in one field are borrowed by other disciplines to advance their studies, the field commands respect. Herbert Simon can be viewed as an example. He is a political scientist by training, interested in management and economics. His management theory regarding decision-making cuts across a few areas of research and won him a Nobel Prize in economics. Are there future possibilities as such for public administration scholars?

Given that public administration is a field dealing with macro-management issues for society as a whole, it needs to have first-class scholars and students. While its hallmark is its emphasis on practice, it should not overlook its task in training young talent to engage in basic research and build a strong, intellectual core. Unless the field can produce work whose influence goes beyond its disciplinary boundary, the macro-impact of the field will be limited.

The Unique Challenges and Opportunities Facing China’s Public administration Scholars

Although China’s academic, public administration programs are relatively new, China’s administrative history goes back thousands of years. This history has left a strong imprint on China’s administrative theory and practice.

As an ancient civilization, China’s legacy in administration is rich and versatile, though not necessarily modern. Just as the western world can trace its civilizations back to the Rulers of the Old Kingdom in Egypt (2780-2280 B.C.), Webster, p. 1665), the Athenian Greeks (City-State, Socrates,
469–399 B.C.; Plato, 427–347 B.C.; and Aristotle, 384–322 B.C.), the Roman Republic (509–31 B.C.), and the Roman Empire (146 B.C.—180 A.D.); the Chinese people can easily trace their civilization back to the Xia Dynasty (2100–1600 B.C.) and West Zhou Dynasty (1066–771 B.C.). These dynasties formulated a massive patriarchal system of governing, involving a complex set of norms (today, we call them administrative ethics). Later, the Qin Dynasty (221–207 B.C.) conquered various kingdoms and built the first Chinese empire, resting on a sophisticated system of hierarchy, regional prefects and counties, division of work within administrative departments (interior affairs, taxation, protocol, military, criminal justice, and technology and craftsman), centrally promulgated laws and regulations (through Shang Yang and San Honyan, both were prime ministers), and standardized the language and measurements. The Qin regime also built massive interstate highways, irrigation canals, and defense projects—such as the Great Wall. The Qin Empire was short lived. But the Han Empire that immediately followed (206 B.C.—220 A.D.) perfected the Qin System, combining Qin’s administrative and legal system with Confucian teaching on moral philosophies, and governed China for the next 400 years. Afterwards, there were a few short periods of division (Three Kingdoms, 220–280 A.D.; Wu Dai Shi Guo, 907–979 A.D.) and major social turmoil, such as the peasant uprising caused by famine and foreign invasions (the Chen Sheng Wu Guang Uprising, 209 B.C.; Liao, 907–1125 B.C.; West Xia, 1032–1227 B.C.; Jing, 1115–1234 B.C.; the Mongolian invasion, 1279–1368; and the Taiping Revolution, 1851–1864 to name a few). China’s administrative system, by and large, stabilized in the Qin-Han system—a centralized government with a sophisticated system of hierarchy, division of work, Confucian moral philosophy, and an institutionalized procedure for open selection of officials through civil service examinations (Kai Ke Qu Shi) for governmental positions in the imperial court. (Emperors, however, were hereditary.)

Since Qin and Han’s times, China had about 11 dynasties (Jin, 265–439; Nan Bei Chao, 420–581; Sui, 581–618; Tang, 618–907; Song, 960–1127; Liao, 907–1125; West Xia, 1032–1227; Jin, 1115–1234; Yuan, 1279–1368; Ming, 1368–1644; Qing, 1644–1911) and 230 emperors. All of them (except for a period of time in the short-lived Liao and Jin dynasties) used the Qin-Han administrative structure and revered Confucian moral philosophy, until Sun Yat-sen led his democratic revolution to overthrow the Qing Dynasty in 1911. Sun established China’s first republic, based on democratic principles imported from the western world. The new philosophy of government was, “The World Belongs to the Public” (Tian Xiu Wei Gong), versus the traditional philosophy that “Every piece of land underneath the heaven belongs to the King.” Sun’s republic was also short-lived, because of the powerful resistance of the traditional society. It started the country’s hundred-year journey, however, towards science, democracy, modernization, and reform. This is an important tradition most western scholars tend to overlook in their research into the more remote, mythical, and either prosperous or corrupt Chinese historical periods, such as the Song (960–1279), Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) Dynasties, or in their interest in contemporary Chinese revolutionary histories (a combination of historical legacies and Russia revolutionary influence).

While Sun Yet-sen started a democratic revolution that was mostly based on his experience in the west (the United States in particular), in 1911, China’s development was to be more influenced by the Soviet Union and Leninist theory. At the time, managerial-capacity building was mostly achieved by three routes: the military schools and colleges that trained military leaders (who later would be transferred to work in civilian capacities), the party schools or party-run Zheen Pa College (College of Politics and Law) that trained political leaders to maintain political control, and technical institutions (such as Colleges of Accounting and Finance) that trained cadres of financial experts. Certain aspects of managerial skills—such as organizational theories, human-resource management, economic development, cultural ethics, international studies, and so on—were missing links in China’s management training. Therefore, when massive reform and development started and managerial talent was now needed, China had to tap into its language, history, philosophy, and economic departments and schools of engineering for these talents. There had been no lack of research on Sun Yat-sen’s democratic theories and Marxist political theories in regular universities, as well as in Party schools. However, the mission of the former was historical studies, and the latter was mostly translating and interpreting Marxist works, rather than testing, validating, and developing those theories. As a result, when Marxist theories could not provide all the answers to China’s reform needs, the country was caught by surprise. This is exactly why, despite China’s genuine efforts to reform, it has kept repeating the same mistakes and encountering the same problems many other developed nations have before. Research that could inform decision-making is lacking and inadequate. By strengthening training and research in public administration, many of the
problems in its continued reform efforts could be avoided or reduced.

The unique administrative environment in China poses unique challenges to China's public administration scholars. First, the deeply entrenched macro-management infrastructure and cultural environment can be a serious challenge. The system has worked relatively well for China when compared to those in other ancient civilizations. Of all the great ancient civilizations—such as the Greek, the Roman Empire, the Babylonians, and the Egyptians—Chinese civilization seems to be the only one that has managed to keep its full-fledged vitality (a testimony to the maturity of its early development). Only in recent centuries, when the western world found new methods that helped create a new industrial civilization, did China's ancient glory start to lose its luster. Many scholars in China, as well as in the rest of the world, are still wondering what it was that slowed China down or sped the west up. The debate on what should or should not be learned from the west has lasted for over a century. While China's intellectual community has gradually and reluctantly adopted some western methods and ideology, under the pressure for change and progress (Zen Guo Fan adopted western weapons, Tan Si Tong attempted Japanese reform, Sun Yat-sun introduced western democracy to China, and Li Da Zhao imported Marxism-Leninism), many of them are still fighting to see how much of their core system can be retained. Additionally, strong legacies of social norms and culture are carried through popular customs, fictions, and entertainment programs. To be an agent of change in such an environment is no easy task.

Second, China's public administration programs are being formulated in the middle of a massive reform, and many social problems are already unfolding. Controlling the effect of an unfolding problem is often more difficult than preventing the problem from happening in the first place. When muddling through complexities becomes necessary, more frustrations will become the norm. Being a leader in such an environment means being responsible for more complaints, criticisms, and pressure. Besides, China's public administration programs do not have much time to ponder disciplinary issues, to develop their academic strengths, to train their field leaders, and to prepare large cohorts of high quality students to work together to promote China's administrative reform. There will be a period of confusion during which everyone can claim to be an administrative scholar, even without enough efforts devoted to the study of administrative issues. When the self-claimed expert messes up, the entire field is blamed. Or, in a different scenario, individuals with a solid knowledge of the field find it hard to implement management ideas and principles because of the lack of popular support and consensus. For this reason, China's public administration scholars have a real need to work hard, be conscientious and committed, and be ready to withstand a few setbacks before the field fully develops.

Third, the world's public administration has many new issues to reconcile. The global trend towards privatization, urbanization, and modernization. Before a child reaches maturity in this scenario, he/she already has to handle intricate relationships with neighbors, partners, friends, and the environment. He/she has to make decisions as to how to change, develop, and grow, and how to work with others who are also changing rapidly. What has happened in other countries over the course of a long period of time may have to happen in China very quickly. Otherwise China will not be able to stay on the same page when communicating with the outside world. This means, schools of public affairs in China may need to incorporate an international dimension, just as their counterparts in many western countries have.

Chinese public administration has great opportunities as well. The first is the opportunity to design and create. China's public administration is in a position to assist the reform that is already underway. Many new things have yet to fully evolve. The discipline has a unique opportunity to lead and influence the direction of China's reform. If done well, China's future prosperity could be attributable to the contributions made by China's public administration scholars.

Also, China's long administrative history has accumulated an enormous amount of management wisdom. When I was studying the fiscal, political, and legal methods in American intergovernmental relations—or studying organizational behavior and culture, interpersonal strategies, and management philosophies—I was surprised to find that what western scholars hold salient and innovative existed thousands of years ago in China. For example, Reagan's slogan that "the government that governs the best is the one that governs the least" is no different from the Lao Zhuang philosophy that managing a big country should be like cooking a small dish: taking it light and letting things run their own course produces the best results. The popular, postmodern thinking has remarkable similarities to Zen, which flourished in China thousands of years ago. Some of the proposed methods have been used or even abused in China to the extreme. When public administration has been raised to a field of study, the
country’s rich history can provide many positive and negative experiences upon which to draw. Public administration is a high calling. It is about serving the public and achieving public purposes. While theories on ruling, governance, political games, and self-interest are an indispensable part of administrative practice, the core concerns of public administration are community, humanity, and collective well-being. At the heart of this discipline lie belief, dedication, and sacrifice, rather than self-interest, calculated gains, and basic animal instinct. To what extent should these ethics be taught, but not manipulated? China’s administrative and moral history has plenty to offer.

China’s feudal bureaucracies, civil-service systems, and management-supervision techniques can also shed light on the already well-developed western-management theories. After all, management theories deal with humans. Only now, a few thousand years later, human societies are operating at a different technological level, while the substance of humans and human interactions remains the same. Some questions still exist, such as “How can society deal with affluence, prosperity, and superpower positions?” and “How can society guard against system entropy (decay) and maintain economic and political vitality?” The faded Chinese Dynasties, as well as Western Empires, have vivid stories to tell.

Indeed, in contemporary China, challenges and opportunities coexist. China’s public administration scholars have a huge task to accomplish. At the same time, they have an opportunity to contribute to the modernization of China, as well as to the world’s treasury of management theories and, consequently, to the world’s long-term peace and prosperity.

Endnotes

1 Robert Lucas, 1995 Nobel Laureate in Economics for having developed and applied the hypothesis of rational expectations, and thereby transforming macroeconomic analysis and deepening understanding of economic policy.

2 Douglass C. North, 1993 Nobel Laureate in Economics for renewing research in economic history, applying economic theory and quantitative methods in order to explain economic and institutional change.

3 Amartya Sen, 1998 Nobel Laureate in Economics for contributions to welfare economics.

4 Friedrich August Von Hayek, 1974 Nobel Laureate in Economics for pioneering work in the theory of money and economic fluctuations and for penetrating analysis of the interdependence of economic, social, and institutional phenomena.

5 John Nash’s game theory on group efficiency.

6 In the modern market system, if a high-tech product does not make it to the top few in terms of quality and market shares, it would most likely be a failure and hard to even recover its investment.

7 Every piece of land under the heaven belongs to the Monarch, and all landlords governing those pieces of land are the Monarch’s subjects. Dong Zhou Lie Guo.

8 “Rites (Li) are essential… Emperor and magistrate, husband and wife, father and son, each has his/her own place in which the emperor dominates the magistrate, husband dominates the wife, and father dominates the son…. Those deemed the revered should be revered. The Emperor should love the people (Ren).” See Confucious in Bai Hua Zhongguo Gu Dian Jing Cui Wen Ku. (1992).

9 “The law can not be applied by itself…. It is not enough to have laws only…. An enlightened monarch governs officials but not the people…. When there are talents politics will take place and when talents die politics cease to exist…. Those who hold talents prosper those who have lost talents perish” (Zhang, 1990, p. 35).


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