
Assessing the State of Public Administration Research in Mainland China: Prospects and Challenges*

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Symposium Introduction

The rapid modernization and globalization of mainland China has resulted in impressive new practices and expectations for public administration (PA), including public administration research and education. Chinese universities have created new master in public administration (MPA) degree programs that already rival U.S. MPA programs in enrollment, with about 15,000 to 20,000 students annually. In 1999, PhD programs in public administration were first established at Fudan University, Renmin University, and Sun Yat-Sen University. Since then, Chinese ministries and universities have ratcheted up quality expectations for university-based public administration research. At the top universities, faculty are increasingly expected to publish in journals that are part of the Social Science Citation Index (SSCI) to keeping pace with similar expectations for quality in neighboring Asian countries and, indeed, around the world. Beyond this, public administration researchers are also expected to contribute to empowering a new generation of public managers and guiding modernization efforts in Chinese public service.

There are high expectations for sure. In September 2007, the School of International Relations and Public Affairs at Fudan University in Shanghai hosted a two-day, international conference entitled, "Public Administration Research and Education in China Today." Conference attendees discussed accomplishments, challenges, and new pathways at this historic juncture. Forty-four scholars from 13 countries and regions (including Hong Kong and Taiwan) attended, and 25 papers were presented. The discussions were open, candid, and vibrant. The conference focused on public administration research, though some sessions also addressed education.

While conference attendees are apt to vary in their assessment, the following is ours, grounded

in the papers, presentations and discussions of the conference.

There is no doubt that public administration research in China has made many strides in recent years. Many young Chinese scholars have received PhD training at some of the best universities in the world. Some of these scholars have found productive "homes" at foreign universities, including institutions in the US, and they publish their work in leading journals. Some foreign-trained Chinese PhDs are returning to mainland China and, like those who have been trained in China, are seeking publication in SSCI journals. Since 2001, the Ministry of Education has granted 24 universities permission to launch new MPA programs, which have grown strongly. *Chinese Public Administration* a China-based journal, launched in 1985, and the China Administration Society, created in 1988, further support public administration research efforts in China.

While this is a fertile time for Chinese public administration research, it is also a period of transition. Well-established philosophical and ideological research traditions in mainland China are seldom favored or accepted in international and Western journals, which favor empirical research grounded in theory, and theoretical research inspired by new facts. Scholars seeking to have their work accepted in SSCI journals face the same challenges of developing and executing research that follows Western practices. Also, due to their very recent creation, many Chinese MPA programs continue to draw heavily on existing economics and political science faculty, only a minority of whom have public administration degrees. Some of the challenges we discuss here are not unique to Chinese scholars and public administration, of course, but they are developmental matters of human capital and research practice that raise question which scholars need to

consider assessing the current state of Chinese public administration research.

First, what is the contribution of Chinese public administration research to the international literature? The ongoing globalization of public administration research implies that scholars from around the world now contribute to the conceptual and theoretical development of public administration knowledge. This is indeed the focus of many SSCI journals, and therefore Chinese scholarship must also connect with the international discourse. It must be grounded in it, inspired by it, and contribute to it in creative and excellent ways. The conference's articles and discussions suggest that public administration in China is still in an emergent stage, and that only a few young scholars are focused on making such contributions, with varying degrees of success.

The need to instill knowledge and respect for quality scholarship is an urgent one. While the richness of Chinese public administration practice has aroused much intellectual curiosity, thereby creating potential opportunities for Chinese scholars to publish in international journals, in the long term such enthusiasm has to be sustained by quality work. Moreover, Western-based scholars also have advantages in being able to do scholarship on the use and diffusion of practices that often first emerge in their countries. Those living in countries that do not tend to lead in public administration practices must either carefully look for what is new, or focus on the discourse and use it to advance themselves as bona fide, global citizens. Learning is the best strategy toward innovation.

Second, what research tools do Chinese public administration scholars have at their disposal? Young scholars in the West often employ survey-based tools because these allow them to gather voluminous datasets that can be used to test theory-based hypotheses. However, the subjects of these surveys are public managers, who, in mainland China, are often inaccessible and unwilling to participate in questionnaires. Because this seems to be the present reality, Chinese scholars must engage in more qualitative-based empirical research, making use of case studies and interview data. While these methods also have limitations in China, public managers can be interviewed, one-on-one, rather than surveyed, such as through a mail survey. This type of case-based scholarship is, however, somewhat more time-consuming than survey-based research and requires solid grounding in the international discourse and its theories. The purpose of such research is to push the frontiers of knowledge, thereby introducing new concepts; case studies and interviews can produce relevant data for that purpose.

These methods need to be further developed in Chinese public administration scholarship.

In this regard, Lu and Chow's "Monitoring the Growth of Chinese Public Administration Knowledge: Evidence from Chinese Public Administration Journals" shows that only 23 of 615 "basic research" articles in Chinese public administration research collected any firsthand data, and only 92 of 615 articles used secondhand data. Similarly, Jing's "Dissertation Research in Public Administration in China" shows that only seven of 132 dissertations have datasets, and none used any form of inferential statistics. Thirty-four dissertations used case studies, but we do not know whether these advanced theory in any innovative way. While these data are not definitive, certainly they strongly imply that the empirical research tradition is still in development.

Third, which resources and conditions do universities and other institutions provide for public administration research? The institutional context of Chinese public administration research is not very favorable. Scholars often have high teaching loads, numerous administrative burdens, and low salaries, which all detract from an investment in scholarship. Although increasing, there are still few journals devoted to public administration in China, and few academic conferences to bring emergent public administration faculty together. Also, government funding for public administration scholarship is limited. These conditions are not unique to China, and faculty in other countries often face similar circumstances. For example, research funding for public administration is nearly absent in the US and many faculty in developed countries also face high teaching loads and financial pressures, especially those who live in expensive cities or are young and raising a family.

A very special constraint is the lack of a sizeable cadre of senior faculty in public administration who have a strong record of publications in SSCI journals. Existing senior faculty were trained in a different style. Yet, because research is an art that requires years of dedication and honing to perfect it—there is reason for the minimum 14 years required for becoming a full professor in the US, for example—the lack of opportunities for new PhDs to co-author with and be mentored by senior faculty in their departments is no doubt a challenge.

Fourth, what is the significance of the English language barrier? According to conference attendees, English is still problematic for Chinese-based scholars. Yet, it is the language of the discipline and formal and informal discourse. Consequently, the important and sad effect of this barrier is a reduction of the potential pool of top

Chinese faculty for international scholarship. While this barrier may disappear in time, for now, it is very much still present.

Despite the above challenges, the scene is also pregnant with significant opportunities. First, there is a rising demand for quality scholarship by many top journals in public administration. This demand reflects an imminent demographic shortfall caused by the retirement of many well-established senior scholars in the US. Many productive authors and top journals are US-based (with some also in the UK). These retirements are part of the larger US “boomer” retirement cycle that has begun. Simply, many of the best-known and well-published US scholars are retiring or ceasing to be as productive as they once were. Further, there are relatively few scholars in the 40–55 age group, which also reflects US demographic patterns, as well as the boomer generation bottleneck of the 1970s and 1980s. In short, there is an increasing demand for quality scholarship in public administration that will likely last for at least another ten years as the newer generation “gets up to speed” and masters the requisite skills.

Second, the ongoing internationalization of public administration research and education creates further opportunities for publishing and collaboration. Internationalization has led to many new English-language journals in the field, for example, in Australia, Hong Kong, South Korea, and Turkey, to name a few. Even though these journals are not always SSCI-indexed, they do provide additional outlets for scholarship. These journals offer further publication opportunities because of the common Western-style research methods they often seek; there is not yet much “Balkanization” of the field.

Third, international travel is increasingly commonplace, and many governments and institutions offer scholars travel stipends. Attending annual conferences is key to knowing the international discourse of the field (several years before it is reflected in the journals), networking, and building productive scholarly relationships. While public administration research is likely to be US dominated for some time to come, it is also becoming increasingly internationalized.

Fourth, recent advances in global communications further collaboration among public administration scholars in ways that transcend barriers. Skype and other VOIP systems make global voice communication cheaper than domestic cell phone rates, and existing tools like email continue to support collaboration. Like their U.S. counterparts, junior faculty in China often do not have senior faculty with whom to collaborate at their universities;

hence, mentoring-by-distance is increasingly the norm. Also, senior U.S. faculty may well be willing to assist new faculty in other countries when approached.

The technical possibilities of international collaboration do not mitigate the time-honored challenge of producing quality academic research, but rather add to it. Methods of comparative research are underdeveloped in public administration, creating a need for new scholars to develop meaningful, theory-grounded ways of doing it. Merely having comparative cases in two or more countries does not do much to further the international discourse of the field, of course. Some conference participants noted this challenge, but it has yet to be resolved.

A variety of pathways are naturally suggested from the above opportunities. It is obvious that Chinese public administration scholars would do well to develop projects that are designed to add value to the international literature. The best approach is to develop research with specific journals in mind, as different journals vary in their theory and empirical research methods, yet few Chinese scholars seem aware of or follow this practice. Also, Chinese scholars should resolve the empirical data problem by developing methodologies that are acceptable to international journals. Indeed, resolving this is a contribution in its own right that could lead to a competitive advantage. Finally, it is obvious that new Chinese scholars must collaborate internationally in order to gain the experience they need. Hence, language and project management skills are requisite.

Yet, perhaps the overarching theme here is that new mentalities must be adopted. A key conclusion is that, despite their cultural interests or identity, Chinese scholars will also need to be citizens of the world; the discourse is international, the contribution is international, the journals have an international readership, and the standards are international. Paradoxically, becoming internationally oriented produces benefits that further national Chinese interests. While some research projects are designed to serve local or national needs without having much, if any, international relevance, the most important and prestigious studies that need to be developed will target a global readership and contribute to knowledge and practice of public administration throughout the world. The question among some conference participants was whether, and in what ways, Chinese institutions will help Chinese scholars make global contributions, which are the hallmark of the elite journals’ discourse.

Overview of Symposium Articles

We present five articles in this *CPAR* symposium. All of them focus on the public administration research

issues in mainland China. In “Monitoring the Growth of Chinese Public Administration Knowledge: Evidence from Chinese Public Administration Journals,” Lu and Chow provide a content analysis of articles that appeared in the journal *Chinese Public Administration*, and they compare their findings with other content analysis studies. While bibliometric studies do vary considerably in how they analyze and categorize studies, the authors state that Chinese public administration is “still in an early stage of development, and its coming of age is more a mirage than reality.”

Lu and Chow additionally note that traditional public administration studies tend to be “descriptive, normative, non-analytical,” resulting in “reductionist narrowness and superficial knowledge accumulation, contributing to mediocrity in scholarship.” Their analysis finds that 89% of the 615 “basic research” articles are non-empirical, and 23% of the 489 “applied research” articles show concern for enriching theoretical knowledge. The latter may suggest the relevance of empirical research for modern theory development, which is furthered and enriched by new facts. Overall, their findings support the idea that Chinese scholarship in public administration is only now beginning to take form.

In “Dissertation Research in Public Administration in China,” Jing finds that dissertations produced in China between 2002 and 2006 can be considered unsatisfactory based on research question, validity, theory relevance, causality, importance, and innovativeness criteria. A comparison between 132 Chinese dissertations and those produced in the US in 1981, 1990 and 1998 shows that the Chinese dissertations were most similar to the U.S. dissertations from 1981. Jing notes major problems in Chinese public administration doctoral programs, including the lack of the orientation toward research, inadequate or inappropriate institutions of PhD advising, and distorted adaptation to internationalization.

Jing concludes that doctoral research in China is still new and experiencing a process of transition toward modern scholarship. Indeed, he points out the need for institutional adjustments and reforms to better meet new objectives. For example, a PhD advisor in China is a formal position that an applicant generally receives one or two years after becoming a full professor. Yet, Jing finds that 132 Chinese PhDs shared a total of 18 PhD advisors, three of whom got their final degrees from abroad and only five of whom had a PhD degree themselves. Younger faculty members, who are at the pinnacle of academic creativeness and productivity and are more aligned with international literature and publications standards, find it hard to involve doctoral students in

their research. It is clear that the modernization of PhD research requires some structural changes in the Chinese system if it is to produce scholars with a potential for making globally competitive contributions to knowledge.

In “Public Science and Technology Policy Research in China,” Sun and Zhang provide a bibliographic study of science and technology (S&T) policy research, which has been of burgeoning interest in China since the 1980s and has received much financial support. Their analysis of 1,410 articles, which appeared in the 13 relevant journals between 2004 and 2006, shows that 66% of first authors’ affiliations were schools of administration, though only about 8% were from public administration. Most were from schools of economic administration and administration that is not specifically public or business oriented, which undoubtedly reflects the nascent development of public administration in China.

Sun and Zhang find about 66% of articles used a qualitative methodology, which they classify as “thinking and debate analysis.” Case studies and comparative studies are few, and only six studies were classified as concerning S&T policy processes. Only 24% of articles used any quantitative analysis. About 28% of references were from English-source journals, with the remainder came mostly from Chinese sources. They also note that while 65% of articles were co-authored, very few young scholars were listed as first authors. Sun and Zhang characterize S&T policy studies as “an immature field” that should be viewed from “a transitional perspective.” Their findings from this specialized field echo those of Lu and Chow for the broader discipline.

In “Three Waves of Public Administration Education in China: The Human Resource Development Perspective,” Zhao discusses the development of public administration in China. Theoretically, the first wave of public administration reached from the Qing dynasty to the Communist party’s reshuffling of the higher educational system in the 1950s. Public administration then experienced “a glacier period” of about three decades in which the development of political science and social sciences were suspended. The second wave started in the late 1970s and peaked in 2001 when new MPA programs were established, introducing modern notions of managerial and administrative values, skills, and knowledge.

However, the lack of professionally trained faculty in Chinese public administration schools is problematic. There is a 30-year development gap between scholars of the old approaches and the new. Very few instructors have received formal training in

public administration; many young professors teach PA core courses after completing short exchange programs in the West. While new public administration schools are being created, the problems of staffing them with well-trained scholars will take longer to resolve as such faculty come up through the ranks and are drawn from those who have studied abroad. The coming third wave may or may not bring solutions to these problems.

In “Empowered Autonomy: The Politics of Community Governance Innovations in Shanghai,” Liu provides a case study of neighborhood governance. Liu discusses the new efforts of the Chinese state to strengthen itself at the grassroots level and their consequences. He looks at the practice in Shanghai, an area with the most advanced practices in urban community building, and applies a combined perspective of social capital creation and democratic engagement. Liu discloses new opportunities and incentives for building a civil society at the community level, such as direct election of urban residents’ committees and three-meeting institutions.

The People’s Republic of China (PRC) is attempting to provide infrastructure for community decision-making to meet the growing demand for community-oriented social services no longer covered by the work unit (*dan wei*) system. Liu shows that new governing arrangements help residents to articulate their interests in an autonomous manner. For example, in March 2001, 20 Shanghai residents attended a sub-committee meeting to propose an outdoor gym for their neighborhood. After further meetings, they submitted a report to the street office for financial support. Within two months, the construction of the gym was completed and opened for public use with applause from many residents.

From the perspective of this symposium, Liu’s study may well be representative of case study research methods that are available to public administration scholars in China. It provides ample evidence of the potential for contributing to international discourse (citizen relations, direct participation, etc) using existing theoretical concepts (accountability, etc.) and empirical methods like case interviews and surveys of participants. At the same time, it also highlights the need for careful attention to the rigorous standards of top journals in the field. Reviewers are apt to ask such advanced questions as: How does the article advance the international discourse and what new concepts or practices does it offer to do so? Also, the survey and interviewing methods require advanced justifications of possible response sets and interviewing biases. Future researchers will want to design their projects with

these and similar considerations in mind in order to increase their success in the international publishing arena.

In sum, the conference and this symposium are most helpful for understanding the challenges and state of public administration in China today. While public administration research is in an emergent state, this situation is not entirely unique relative to other developing countries, and it is filled with significant opportunities for a rich development. The burgeoning internationalization of public administration, both as a practice and a discipline, has created numerous possibilities for Chinese scholars. We express the sincere hope they will grasp these opportunities by actively participating in the global dialogue of the discipline, forging productive research partnerships with their international colleagues, and shifting to evidence-based research using state-of-art research methods found in the top journals.

Notes

* This introduction and the following symposium papers only discuss public administration issues of mainland China, leaving Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao aside.

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