Reflections on the Continued Relevance of Selected Articles Authored by Western Scholars in the First Decade of the Chinese Public Administration Review (2002-2009)

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The Chinese Public Administration Review (CPAR) has assumed an enduring role in defining the Sino-Western dialogue on public administration. This issue reprints and reflects upon influential articles from CPAR’s first decade, finding that each article contributed by a Western scholar has continued relevance to the field of public administration in both Asian and non-Asian contexts, just as the many articles published in CPAR by Asian academics have continued global relevance.

Mary Hamilton’s argument that government is indispensable, “Government Matters More Than Ever: Toward Respect for Government in an Increasingly Privatized World,” published in CPAR in 2002, is ever more relevant in our rapidly changing and increasingly complex world. Both government and markets have essential roles to play for social systems to work and desired outcomes to be achieved. Neither government nor markets are an end; rather, they are a means to provide services and goods to society. Before World War I, national governments had little effective control over the economy. Now it is hard to imagine that markets are considered superior to government. There have been market failures as well as government failures. All of the forces driving globalization, which are particularly apparent in global relationships with China and the entire Asian continent, are driving the increasing interdependence of nations, organizations, and individuals. China and its neighbors continue to serve as evidence that government matters more than ever in terms of maintaining economic prosperity; in fighting climate change, global terrorism and human trafficking across national boundaries; and in meeting citizens’ expectations that the promises made in foundational documents over the last century or more will be fulfilled. Government is indispensable.

Greg Chen’s examination of Chinese healthcare insurance, “A Study of Healthcare Reform in China in Light of the USA and Canadian Systems,” published in CPAR in 2007, analyzed a system characterized by national government mandates, local government administration, and employer/employee contributions. This study found that the Chinese basic medical insurance program for urban employees was implemented in all major urban areas, and as of May 2005 about 130 million people were covered under the scheme. As in the U.S. and the implementation of Obamacare that followed a few years subsequent to establishment of the Chinese health care insurance system, there have been significant problems and concerns associated with program benefits. Dr. Chen suggested that China can learn from the U.S. and Canadian systems in terms of financing and healthcare delivery. But it also important to acknowledge that the U.S. and Canadian systems have problems and challenges that China may have previously encountered as it has been exploring and conducting healthcare reform for urban dwellers as well as rural residents. For example, since 2006 the central government has increased subsidies for central and western regions for farmers participating in the new rural cooperative medical system; increased cooperative medical subsidies via provincial subsidies to localities; and taken other initiatives to deliver on healthcare promises.

Marilyn Rubin, addressing gender-responsive budgeting in CPAR in 2009, “Gender-Responsive Budgeting: Moving Women in China Further Along the Road to Full Equality,” observes that progress toward gender equality has gained momentum in countries all over the world. The near unanimous adoption by the UN in 1979 of the Convention on the
Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) defined what constitutes gender discrimination, and it also set an agenda for international and national action to end it, such as Prof. Rubin’s description of China’s agenda in the following areas: educational attainment, economic opportunities and participation, health and well-being, and political empowerment. Prof. Rubin uses the term “gender-responsive budget” (GRB) to define a government budget that explicitly integrates gender into any or all parts of the decision-making process regarding expenditures and/or revenues. The Chinese government recognizes that although significant progress has been made toward achieving gender equality, there is still more that must be done. The 2005 amendments to China’s 1992 Law on the Protection of Women’s Rights and Interests moved women further along the road to full equality. Nevertheless, it is still a long journey for women to achieve this full equality. For example, the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the Chinese Community Party now consists of seven members, all of them men. Over the history of the Chinese Community Party, never has any women served on that Standing Committee. In the same vein, in the history of the United States of America, never have women been elected to the highest offices of president or vice-president, or to even a near majority in the U.S. Congress or the state legislatures. Although Prof. Rubin defined the necessary steps a decade ago, gender-responsive budgeting in both countries is still insufficient to markedly improve the situation in both countries in terms of moving women in China, the U.S. or anywhere else further along the road to full equality.

Ahmed Shafiqul Huque, in his 2004 CPAR article on Hong Kong, “Balancing values, Pressures and Demands: Strategies for Public Administration in Hong Kong and China,” holds that it is inherently a part of China, an issue that is as relevant in 2019 as it was fifteen years ago. He holds that since returning to China in 1997, Hong Kong has been experienced a series of challenges related to the innovative idea of “one country, two systems.” The author highlighted the challenges in striking a balance between the values of traditional public administration and new public management, between local and national interests, between external and internal pressures for change, and between demands from the society for service and capacity of the government to respond. Of note, the author indicated in 2004 that as a special administrative region (SAR) of China, Hong Kong was imposed the additional task of promoting in the national interest as well. Balancing the promotion and protection of local and national interest is always a challenging issue, most recently evident in April of 2019, as the “extradition bill” triggered escalating protests in Hong Kong, and the international community has become involved, for example, in the United States of America via the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act in November of 2019. Hong Kong faces continuing challenges of balancing values, pressures and demands—all within the framework Prof. Huque put forth in 2004.

Writing in CPAR in 2004, Mark Funkhouser and Joan Yanjun Pu, in “Government Performance Auditing in the U.S. and China: Lessons Drawn from a Comparative Review,” held that the concept of auditing is as old as the history of civilization. As early as 3,000 years ago the Western Zhou Dynasty united most of China under a single government, within which an auditing function existed. Performance auditing was evident as early as the 1940s in the U.S. and has emerged in recent years in China. The United States General Accounting Office (GAO) expanded its work and moved into program evaluation in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In comparison, whereas China has continued a dialogue on performance auditing since 2001. Performance auditing fulfills important roles in improving government accountability and public trust: program evaluation, watchdog, catalyst for change and a means of holding government accountable. Fifteen years after its publication, principal lessons learned from this article continue to be that the problems and conditions that lead to the development of performance auditing transcend cultural and political differences; the major challenges facing performance auditing are similar in each of the two countries; and each country can certainly learn from the other.

Technological transformations and innovation have continually shaped much of our contemporary
life, not only for the private sector but also for the delivery of public services as well. In this 2002 CPAR article, Edward T. Jennings, Jr. addressed three questions in his examination of “E-Government and Public Affairs Education”: 1) Where does e-government fit in the curriculum of graduate programs in public policy and administration? 2) Might we expect the answer to this question to vary depending on the institutional home and type of public affairs degree? 3) Should we expect programs to offer a required course on e-government or should we aim to integrate material on e-government throughout the curriculum? These questions are still relevant to today’s curriculum of graduate programs in public policy and administration degrees. A single course cannot successfully cover technical, managerial, and policy dimensions of e-government. Hence, it might be more effective to include e-government components across a range of courses in the MPA curricula offered by hundreds of programs in the U.S., and about as many in China.

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