

Elites and Governance in China

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 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2013
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

[[CIP DATA TO FOLLOW]]

ISBN: 978-0-415-81376-1 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-203-30679-6 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Florence Production Ltd, Stoodleigh, Devon, UK

1 Introduction

Elites and governance in China

Xiaowei Zang and Chien-wen Kou

This edited volume examines elite perceptions and behaviour with regard to governance in the People's Republic of China (PRC). Elites are the privileged groups that wield disproportionately large power and influence in society (Zang 2004). They can be business leaders, key opinion makers, important politicians, leading intellectuals, etc. who control major material, symbolic and political resources within a country. Perceptions refer to a mixture of norms, values, and evaluative and non-evaluative understanding of a situation or event (Reis and Moore 2005: 2–3). Governance is measured in terms of expectations, the allocation of power and resources, and performance appraisal. Thus, this book will be highly relevant for policy making for international organizations, governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) outside China, and appeal to scholars and students interested in Chinese politics and governance. In addition, this book is a pioneering effort to bring together elite studies and governance studies for an analysis of the relationship between elites and governance in China. It is surprising that there have been few efforts to understand governance in China from the perspective of elite perceptions and behaviour (Zang 2006). This may result from the preoccupation on institutions in research on governance in China and the preoccupation on elite background characteristics and mobility in elite studies (Zang 2008). This edited volume will address this knowledge gap as discussed below.

Many social scientists have analysed governance in terms of institutions in the PRC. They are puzzled by China's rapid economic progress since institutions such as independent judiciary that are believed to be essential for market growth do not exist in the PRC (Li and Lian 1999; Shevchenko 2004). This has thus fuelled a lively discussion about the nature of China's political institutions and the extent that the capacity of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) capacity to govern has changed since market reforms started in 1978. Scholars have contemplated whether the PRC has made genuine efforts to institutionalize its political and economic systems (Alpermann 2009; Burns 1998; Heilmann 2005; Zang 2005) and whether the CCP has revitalized itself and consolidated its legitimacy and ability to rein in the PRC (Breslin 2006; Dickson 2000; 2004; Laliberté and Lanteigne 2007; Shambaugh 2009).

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Scholars interested in institutional approaches have seldom used the elite as a key variable in research on governance perhaps because there might be an oblivious and risky movement towards an analysis of governance from the perspective of agency. However, it is necessary to point out that risk does not exist since elites are the product of institutions (Reis and Moore 2005: 2; also Zang 2004). Equally important, because of their strategic position in society, the political elite are more likely than other social groups to determine the fate of a political regime, shape its path of reform and change, and have inputs in the formation of institutions. This is particularly true for China since Chinese leaders govern the PRC as an autocracy. They have presided over the CCP, the Chinese state and the PRC where institutions have been historically weak (Pei 2006). Unlike their counterparts in former socialist regimes in East Europe (McFaul 1995, 2006), the Chinese political elite have remained in power to guide market reforms and heightened participation in the world economy after 1978. They are likely to be a key explanatory variable of why the CCP survived the political crises of 1989 (Hua 2006; Sun 1995) and why the PRC has yet to undergo the twin processes of political change and privatization that have already occurred in many former socialist countries in East Europe (Walder 2004). It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to understand China's political and economic trajectory relying on a study of its political institutions. Elite perceptions and behaviour matter with regard to governance in the PRC. Accordingly, this book goes one step further than to examine how institutions determine the capacity to rule in China. Its main focus is on how the elites think and do in terms of governance in China, supplementing the institutional analysis of governance with the insights from elite studies.

There have already been many good studies of the political elite in post-1978 China, which have closely followed the research programme and methodology set up by Robert Scalapino (1972). Their focus has been on the main background characteristics of China's top leaders and recruitment into leadership posts in the CCP and the PRC (Bo 2007; Lee 1991; Li 2001; Shih 2009; Zang 1991, 1993, 1998, 2001a, 2001b, 2004). The findings from this literature are important since they show how much the Chinese political system has changed and how open it has become. However, the existing literature on elite recruitment and mobility is not very helpful in promoting understanding of how the elites govern the PRC. Moreover, existing elite studies are essentially a literature on the top leadership in the PRC. It has not adequately examined officials at the lower rungs of the power hierarchy in China and the elites who are not politicians as if governance is an exclusive realm of the top leaders in the PRC. In fact, the top leaders formulate policies after listening to other social groups such as opinion makers and leading intellectuals in China, and rely on their subordinates to implement policies (Zang 2004).

To address the knowledge gaps in governance studies and elite studies mentioned above, the editors of this book organized an International Conference

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on 'Elites and Governance in China' held at the National Chengchi University (NCCU) in Taiwan in November 2010. The conference was supported by a generous grant from the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange and by funding support from the NCCU. More than thirty scholars from Australia, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, the UK and the US attended this first international scholarly dialogue on the elites and governance in China. The chapters in this edited volume were selected from the papers presented in the conference. The contributors carefully revised their papers after receiving constructive comments and suggestions from the editors.

As noted, the existing literature on China's leadership has focused on national political elites. In comparison, the elites studied in this edited volume are functionaries, grassroots elites, leading intellectuals and opinion makers in China. Unlike the existing literature on China's leadership, our interest lay not in the elites' backgrounds or how they had risen to the positions they held, but rather in what they actually thought and did with regard to governance in the PRC: in this respect, our academic concern was focused on their role as opinion makers, technical experts, producers of knowledge and executives or managers. Accordingly, the questions the contributors of this book ask include: What are elite perceptions of governance, inequality and justice? What do the elites mean by good governance? What is the influence of non-CCP elites in policy making and implementation in China? How have they exerted their influence in the PRC and influenced its direction of future development? What have grassroots elites contributed to governance in local communities? These questions are central to a good understanding of how the elites have governed post-1978 China.

The findings reported in Chapters 2–8 show the active and effective participation in governance by a wide range of the elites, including leading intellectuals, functionaries and grassroots/or community elites. They have introduced new concepts such as social justice and good governance into the PRC, guided and taken part in the discourse on how best China will be governed, and turned central policies into realities. The findings also show the importance of community elites in maintaining social stability at the grassroots levels. Clearly, although the Chinese Communist Party has maintained a firm grip on power in the PRC, governance in China has evolved into a complex political enterprise in which multiple key social actors have actively influenced, negotiated and participated in the processes of governing, including decision making and policy-implementation. The PRC is no longer the country in which the CCP led everything from 1949 to 1978.

The major change in governance in China has been the outcomes of significant social, economic and political transformations in the post-1978 era. When the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, the Chinese economy was on the brink of collapse and the official ideology of the CCP had lost its appeal to Chinese citizens (Sun 1995). To restore its mandate to rule, the CCP decided to pursue market reforms of China's economy while insisting on its dictatorship over Chinese society. Indeed, the rapid economic growth has

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turned China into the second largest economy in the world in some thirty years, the CCP's confidence in its ability to rule has been greatly strengthened and the Chinese leaders have become increasingly assertive in international affairs. At the same time, market reforms have diversified the economic and occupational structures in the PRC. As a result, interesting groups, including charity organizations and neighbourhood commitments, have mushroomed and vied with one another and with the state to articulate their aspirations and advance their ambitions. The Internet, Twitter, blogs, etc. have become major outlets for unofficial or unorthodox voices to be heard. The print and electronic media have also joined this gala because of the relentless pursuit of profits and cut-throat competition for survival (Zang 2011). These new developments have been structurally determined and cannot be stopped or slowed down by strict control and monitoring by the party-state. It is extremely difficult for the CCP to continue its one-party dictatorship since the cost of effective bureaucratic control over a complex economy and increasing plural society is forbiddingly high and thus unrealistic. The growing participation of governance by multiple social groups has become a political fact regardless of whether or not the CCP welcomes or disapproves it.

The CCP is no longer in a position to monopolize governance as it did in Mao's China of 1949–76, partly because of its economic globalization strategy. Mao's policy of maintaining China's self-reliance from the capitalist world economic system was economically unsustainable and proved to be a costly mistake that the CCP made in the first 29 years it was in power. The CCP elite realized that to survive economically in today's world, China had no choice but to participate in the international division of labour and international trade. Yet participation in the world capital economy compelled the PRC to import and accept some key ideas and concepts related to the governance of a market economy. These ideas and concepts, such as transparency and accountability, have either been derived from the governance of a society in the West, or have direct implications on how a society is governed. To reject them is to reject the rules of the game of the world economy in which the PRC has participated. To accept them is to allow a new style of governance in China, which departs from party dictatorship and demands the involvement of various social actors.

Of course, from the perspective of agency, one may argue that the Chinese political elite have the capacity or determination to bring China back to the era of self-reliance and self-imposed isolation from the international community if it chose to do so. This would be a likely scenario if its reign were undermined by its interaction with the rest of the world and regime change became a real possibility. However, the PRC regime has appeared to entrench its position due to rapid economic growth in the post-1978 era. As long as the benefits of participation in the global economy outweigh the political costs/risks, Chinese leaders are happy and willing for their country to be a member of the international community. Given China's huge trade surplus and the resulting large foreign current reserves, few, if any, would agree that it is not

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advantageous for the PRC to engage the world. In fact, the Chinese political elite are striving for a bigger say in international affairs to promote the image and status of the PRC in the international community to better advance China's strategic interests on the world stage (Olson and Prestowitz 2007; Yang 2005). To reach this target, the political elite have realized that it is essential for the PRC to behave according to international norms and standings. This is partly why the discourse on governance has been accepted or even encouraged in the PRC.

Furthermore, the CCP has selectively welcomed inputs from various sectors in society. Culturally, China has a long history of Chinese statecraft in which the gentry, intellectuals and officials were encouraged to submit ideas to the emperor. A good emperor was a king who listened to opinions from different people in order to govern society effectively. This has formed the cultural background for the change in governance in the post-1978 era. Today, the increasingly confident Chinese leadership is proclaiming the revival of the Middle Kingdom, and is eager to learn from experts inside and outside China how to behave as the leader of an emerging superpower. Proposals for strengthening political stability, ethnic unity, etc. are either enthusiastically greeted or cautiously welcomed by top leaders, especially if they are judged to be beneficial and cost-effective for the enhancement of governance. In other words, opinion makers and other elite groups have played an increasingly important role in governance in the PRC.

Moreover, the CCP elite have realized that they cannot do everything themselves given that they have only seven days a week. They have to rely on bureaucrats at the lower rungs of the political hierarchy to manage the Chinese state and society. They have been less anxious about the movement of some corners of society beyond the direct reach of the state: these corners (e.g. village governments and rural organizations, as discussed in Chapter 5) can be governed by non-CCP elites or can become more or less autonomous as they are no longer the strategic sources of revenue for China. The PRC has increased its economic reliance on international trade and rural China has increasingly been regarded as a financial burden rather than an asset. This is partly why the CCP elite has promoted village elections and become more tolerant of the participation of governance at the grassroots level by a growing number of community elites. In other words, grassroots elites have played an increasingly important role in governance in the PRC.

However, as noted, the changes in governance in post-1978 China have not been adequately examined, especially in terms of elite perceptions and behaviour in general, and inputs from elites on the lower rung of the political hierarchy and those who are not politicians. Thus, the contributors to this book analyse the involvement of governance by some key elite groups in terms of their contributions to policy making and implementation in the PRC. The elite groups they study include intellectuals, opinion makers, government functionaries, community leaders and village chiefs. They examine both elite perceptions and behaviour. The research methods the contributors have used

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include in-depth interviews, surveys, observations, etc. with which they have built solid databanks for their studies. The empirical analyses are conducted sophisticatedly and the main findings are presented effectively in the chapters that follow.

In Chapter 2, Yingjie Guo takes a discourse-centred approach that delves into the issues that intellectuals grapple with rather than their structural positions vis-à-vis other social groups or their institutional affiliations; it does not take autonomy from the party-state as an end in itself but analyses intellectuals' ideological orientations. Guo offers a snapshot of China's intellectual elites' social role through analysing intellectual discourses on the interrelated issues of social justice and social class, and the impact of the discourses on the government's social policy. While intellectual discourses converge with the party line in some areas, they challenge it, fill gaps in it, distort it, or generate pressure on the party-state to take action on sociopolitical issues and shape government policy. Policy making is no longer an exclusive realm of the CCP as it was during the Mao era of 1949–76. Intellectual elites have played a more important role in developing concepts and policies for governance in the PRC.

In Chapter 2, Yingjie Guo shows how the discourse of governance in the PRC has generated a great deal of academic interest and begun to affect the conceptualization of statecraft, rulership, government and political control among social commentators and party-state officials. The discourse on governance is more amazing than the one on social justice and classes since in large part the emergence, development and impact of the discourse are attributable to the efforts of China's intellectual elites who have introduced an essentially foreign idea to China and brought it to bear on political reform in the country. In effect, the intellectual elites have created a centripetal circle of influence around the party-state and helped induce a paradigm shift in conceptualization and normative prescription from government to governance and from good government to good governance. That illustrates the elites' critical role as knowledge producers, opinion makers, agents of globalization and a driving force for domestic change, despite assertions by critics about their marginalization during market transition and their capitulation to or cooptation by the CCP.

In Chapters 2 and 3, Yingjie Guo studies how Chinese intellectuals have affected policy making on domestic affairs in the PRC. In Chapter 4, Quansheng Zhao examines how Chinese intellectuals and other social groups have participated in the policy-making processes of Chinese foreign policy. Zhao develops a conceptual framework, moving between the 'inner circle' and the 'outer circle'. He points out a key development since 1998 – the increasingly active and multilayered channels between the inner circle (the top leaders in the Chinese government) and the outer circle (think tanks and scholars). Zhao outlines a notion of seven channels between these two bodies. These types of policy mechanisms include consultations with policy makers, internal reports, conferences and public policy debates, policy NGOs, outside-

system discussions, overseas scholars and epistemic community. Zhao discusses each of these mechanisms in detail, and argues that recent developments in policy communities and increased activity by think tanks have achieved great progress in influencing the foreign policy-making process in Beijing, beginning between the eras of Mao and Deng and continuing to the present time. This success is due to three changes in Chinese society: the development of civil society, greater demand for policy input and growing professionalism in foreign policy apparatus. However, think tanks still face severe limitations, including a lack of ability to openly criticize official foreign policy due to the authoritarian nature of Chinese society and a lack of personnel exchange between think tanks and government agencies, on account of the continued peripheral status of think tanks. One may anticipate that as civil society continues to develop in China, there will be both increased demand for policy input and increased professionalism in both governmental agencies and think tanks. It is likely that this will push scholars and policy communities to play more significant functions in the policy-making process. In other words, the limitations on think tanks may become weaker in the future.

Chapter 5 shows that elite perceptions affect not only policy making but also policy implementation in the PRC. David Bray studies how government functionaries have turned concepts and ideas into realities at the national level. He points out a paradox in contemporary China that the decline of the planned economy since 1978 has been accompanied by an increase in the influence of town planners, architects and urban designers. The new Urban and Rural Planning Law (2008), which mandates formal 'master planning' for every scale of administrative territory from the nation down to the village, underscores the alignment of governmental and professional commitment to purposefully shape the built environment for political, economic and social ends. The elite discourse and practice of 'master planning' that has emerged in recent years, then, manifests not only in grandiose mega-projects like the Beijing Olympics and the Shanghai Expo, but also in thousands of other development projects across the nation: new 'CBDs', urban housing estates, county development zones, 'new villages', and so on. Taking examples from various scales of planning, Bray shows that in contemporary China, elite discourses of planning are just as likely to affect distant villages or peri-urban suburbs as the heart of Beijing or Shanghai. Moreover, the significance of contemporary 'master planning' lies less in discourses of national resurgence than in a new manifestation of utopian modernism launched by Chinese leaders through the 'theory of scientific development': within this paradigm, the key objective of government planners is to reorder and standardize the built environment so as to render communities and economies more transparent and governable.

In Chapter 6, Chunrong Liu explores why and how local residents who are members of elite groups in society engage in community governance in Shanghai. The elite groups include expatriates from the West, business people, retired government officials, and overseas Chinese from Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan. He claims that the local government has promoted the formation

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of networks and associations among residents, and the resulting associational life has created social space for citizen participation in governance and civil activism by elite residents. The extent to which privileged residents are involved in neighbourhood politics depends not on material incentives as conventional wisdom would suggest, but on an interactive process of framing and identity reconstruction in a civic setting in urban China. This is illustrated by ethnographic evidence of elite behaviours in an upper middle-class urban neighborhood in Shanghai, where group participatory initiatives have not only created an action context, but also cultivated collective awareness among elite residents and fostered their engagement in community governance. Liu's study shows an increasing role in urban governance played by individuals who are not part of the political establishment in the PRC. He also shows how grassroots officials and privileged residents have worked together to produce political stability and governability in the authoritarian context.

Do grassroots elites perform a similar role in governance in rural China? As noted above, in the post-1978 era, the CCP has retreated from direct intervention in rural politics, and many interest groups have emerged in China that have the potential to challenge the status quo. How do village leaders contribute to political stability in rural China? In Chapter 7, Mingxing Liu and Yu Tao analyse the development and governance modes of intermediate associations and explore the roles of village leaders in reducing the frequency of collective petitions in China's villages. Using data on petitions by rural peasants and intermediate association in rural China from a national representative sample and in-depth interviews, Liu and Tao develop four ideal types of intermediate association (Shadows, Puppets, Mavericks and Cooperators) for a study of petitions by rural peasants. 'Shadows' refer to the associations such as the Women's Federation or Communist Youth League. Although these organizations are called 'mass associations' in China, they are essentially government agencies. They are run by village leaders and do not have the trust from ordinary villagers. These associations can hardly persuade peasants to give up petitioners. 'Puppets' refer to the associations that are not self-governed such as the Folk Dance Society. They are established in response to the upper-level government's call to preserve and develop traditional Chinese culture. Some members receive salaries from the government. They are viewed as the puppet of the government by ordinary villagers and are unable to ask peasants not to carry out petitions. 'Mavericks' refer to the intermediate associations that are self-governed but not embedded in the existing official political structure in rural China (such as village churches). Such originations are full of vitality and are not run by village leaders. They are likely to support petitions by their members. Finally, 'Cooperators' refer to the associations that are self-governed but have members who are village leaders. It thus provides an ideal platform for village cadres and ordinary villagers to exchange ideas and suggestions among them. As a result, these organizations have reduced the frequency of collective petitions. This chapter shows that the mode of governance in Mao's era embodied in the dichotomy between dominating

village leaders and submissive peasants (Oi 1985) can no longer apply to rural China today, now that new modes of rural governance have emerged and that it is possible for the CCP to maintain political stability in the countryside if village leaders are strategically positioned in rural fabrics.

Given the importance of elite perceptions and behaviour with regard to governance in the PRC, one cannot help but wonder how the Chinese leadership manages these elites to ensure they serve the regime's interests. The central authorities have marginalized or even suppressed the elites who are political outsiders 体制外 and have challenged the CCP's legitimacy. One example is the jail sentence the government has imposed on the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo, a Chinese literary critic, writer and human rights activist who has called for political reforms and the end of communist one-party rule. Another example is Ai Weiwei, a Chinese artist who is active in sculpture, installation, architecture, photography, film, and social and political criticism. He has been openly critical of the PRC's policy on democracy and human rights, and investigated government corruption and cover-ups. In 2011, he was held by the police for over two months without any official charges being filed. It remains to be seen how effective the Chinese government's policy in suppressing political dissidents and maintaining one-party rule in the PRC will be.

How do the central authorities discipline the elites who are part of the power hierarchy 体制内 to make sure that they do not deviate from official policy? This question can be partially addressed with a study of official anti-corruption campaigns in China. Rampant cadre corruption has become a major governance issue in China today, and top leaders have repeatedly stated that utter, unchecked corruption would ultimately undermine the CCP's legitimacy, and they have called for measures to stamp out official corruption. Yongshun Cai provides a case study in Chapter 8. He points out that a state's political will of anticorruption is fundamental to its success in curbing corruption. In most societies, corruption cannot be entirely prevented *ex ante*, so what is crucial to *ex post* anticorruption is obtaining timely and accurate information on it. Cai proposes an approach to assess a state's political will by examining how information on corruption is collected and used in China. It suggests that a state with a strong political will is better able to win the support of its people in the collection and use of such information. In contrast, a compromised political will of anticorruption not only makes it difficult for the state to obtain timely and accurate information but also results in ineffective use of information. Cai uses the coexistence of rampant corruption and the disciplining of a large number of officials in China to elaborate on the interaction among the state's political will, information collection and anticorruption efforts.

Together, the above seven chapters provide solid evidence of how elite perceptions and behaviour affect governance in the PRC. They offer a reference point for research on and forecasts of the political and economic development in China in the past and the years to come. For example, the discourse on social

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classes and poverty among Chinese intellectuals (Chapter 3) might have had a direct impact on the CCP's resolution to build a harmonious society 和谐社会 in the PRC. The discourse on governance might have motivated the Chinese top leaders to start to discuss or even adopt some of the international norms in governance (such as accountability and transparency).

In fact, the importance of this edited volume goes far beyond its attempt to enlarge the scope of elite studies and bring the elite into mainstream social science research on governance for a better understanding of policy making and implementation in the PRC. Inadequate attention to the role of the elite in governance has left a substantial gap in the scholarship on China, East Asia and the developing countries more generally. There has been only one book on elite perceptions of poverty and inequality in developing countries (Reis and Moore 2005). A thorough assessment of and dialogue on elite perceptions and behaviour will result not only in a better understanding of the political system in China, but more importantly will help re-examine institutional approaches and many of the concepts and terms of reference with which mainstream social science studies of political behaviour in general and governance in particular are conducted.

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