

Original article

DOI: 10.17323/1999-5431-2023-0-6-70-83

CONTINUITY VERSUS CHANGE: EVOLVING TRAJECTORIES OF CHINESE PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Yijia Jing¹, Zijuan Zhang²

¹ Ph.D., Professor, School of International Relations and Public Affairs, Yiwu Research Institute, Fudan University, China; 220 Handan Rd, Shanghai 200433, China; jingyj@fudan.edu.cn (*Corresponding author*); ORCID: 0000-0003-4772-5482

² Ph.D. Student; School of International Relations and Public Affairs, Fudan University, China; 220 Handan Rd, Shanghai 200433, China; zjzhang21@m.fudan.edu.cn; ORCID: 0009-0009-4830-8921

Abstract. China's public administration system has been shaped by incremental reforms since China started its reform and opening up in 1978. These reforms highlighted a delicate balance between continuity and change so gradual, incessant, and autonomous adaptation to China's socioeconomic development as well as to its external environment could happen. Since China moved into the "deep-water zone" in the recent decade, does this reform strategy remain effective? This article examines the Chinese way of introducing public administration reforms, with a focus on the reforms in the past decade. Although incremental reform has in general been kept useful, changing internal and external conditions in China have made it more difficult to achieve innovations and systematic transformation through incremental reforms. An apparent approach to politicization has replaced the fragile politics-administration dichotomy and reshaped the way of value balancing in China's administrative system.

Keywords: public administration; reform; incremental reform; politicization; China.

For citation: Yijia Jing and Zijuan Zhang (2023) 'Continuity versus change: Evolving trajectories of Chinese public administration', *Public Administration Issue*, 6 (electronic edition), pp. 70–83 (in English). DOI: 10.17323/1999-5431-2023-0-6-70-83.

JEL Classification: D73, H83.

Introduction

Public administration in China has developed dynamically since 1978 under the influence of numerous factors. These include, above all, the long-standing administrative traditions, the socialist practices since 1949 and the new learning

processes and innovations to adapt to a market economy and an open society (Auffrecht and Bun, 1995). Reforms were introduced to the system, enabling it to adapt to and facilitate vast changes in the socioeconomic environment. Looking back, Chinese public administration has provided an effective administrative foundation for China's development towards the world's second largest economy and the number one trade country and has cumulated such internal and external governance capacities to support huge public programs like the poverty alleviation campaign and Belt-Road Initiative.

Incremental reform has been widely recognized as the fundamental difference between China's transition path and those of many other former socialist countries, and as one major cause of China's success (Zheng, 1999; Jing 2017, 2020). Incremental reform highlights a delicate way of introducing changes. Incremental reform is not a single reform, but a framework and philosophy of change. In China's reform context, it requests an introduction of economic reforms under an existing political regime, creating a virtuous interplay between economic and political sectors. Reforms may not have a clear long-term goal at the beginning but aim at continuous processes of problem identification and solution, with a promise to keep dynamic and piecemeal adjustments and improvements. Reforms usually start from local and easy areas as experimental and informal practices before formal and national policies are enacted. Reformers are inclined to induce changes by demonstrating performance, providing incentives, and exchanging for consensus instead of imposing fiat and orders. So in general incremental reform makes use of innovations to reveal and utilize the potential vitality within the system and to enable changes.

Incremental reform receives fundamental support from behavioral and institutional theories. Bounded rationality, complex system interdependence, and the absence of charismatic leadership often make gradual changes the only possible and viable second-best solution (Simon, 1957; Lindblom, 1959; Allison, 1969). Theories like path dependence theory and population ecology theory also provide alternative mechanisms to explain inertia in human and institutional behavior (Pierson, 2000; Hannan and Freeman, 1984). Nonetheless, incremental reform may not necessarily lead to good performance, and it may strengthen the lock-in effect that fixes the system in an inefficient path (David, 1985). Radical reform, such as "big bang" or "shock therapy" reforms, are deemed indispensable to break the inefficient path and to avoid more destructive revolutions when incremental changes no longer work. Which reform strategies work often depends on multiple dynamic factors in the exact reform contexts.

China's reforms in public administration followed an incremental path as well. In this paper, public administration reforms are defined as purposeful changes to the structures, functions, values, and authorities of the public administration system. This definition adopts a broad view of public administration as part of the general institutional system, which reflects the reality that China's public administration system has always been deeply and directly influenced by external sectors such as the political system. Accordingly, the paper focuses on major reforms in areas such as politics-administration relations, civil service, intergovernmental relations, performance management, public finance, anti-corruption, technical up-

grading, government-market relations, and government-society relations. In these reform areas, changes were introduced in a gradual manner, allowing the system to afford a process of learning by doing. These reforms were not always linear and often accommodated such “two-step forward and one-step back” changes and processes of punctuated equilibrium. Values, institutions, and personnel of Chinese public administration were reshaped in these reforms to respond to complex governance demands from its domestic and international environments.

Public administration in China can hardly be defined by any of the existing administrative paradigms or their hybrids. Western public administration models such as traditional Weberian public administration, New Public Management and New Public Governance have only been partially adopted in China. Meanwhile, despite many rounds of major restructuring, China’s administrative system kept its many initial attributes rooted in its planned-economy history. This unique system reconciles elements from different frameworks and highlights China’s pragmatic governance philosophy that maximizes adaptation performance in governing unprecedentedly new and complex societies (Jing, 2017; Tang, 2020). As a result, the Chinese public administration model, if there is one, lacks clear theoretical prescriptions, and is often covered by the general descriptions of China models such as the western-coined Beijing Consensus and the China-Style Modernization proposed by the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in October 2022.

Why was incremental reform in China viable in the past decades, and will it be viable in the future? This is the core question that this article aims to answer, and the reason to raise this question is that new governance contexts, issues, and challenges in China have made previous reform methods more difficult to be successful.

Since gradual change is more often than not a default choice across different countries and cultures, the essential question is whether China can still afford incremental reform to achieve good governance, or it has to risk initiating comprehensive reform.

To offer a preliminary answer, this paper will study the relation between change and continuity in Chinese public administration and will focus on the past decade, namely between 2012–2022. In the following, the paper will first establish a framework to understand how change and continuity were balanced in the incremental reform of Chinese public administration and why such a balance could be effective. The public administration reforms in the past decade are used to empirically examine the power of the framework. The paper will then provide further discussions before being concluded.

Change versus continuity:

Value balancing in Chinese public administration

Since 1978 reform has become a buzzword in all sectors of China including public administration. Yet at the beginning, there were no accepted ideas about what to reform and how to reform. Reforms in the former Soviet Union and Central and East European socialist countries hardly provided successful and useful

examples, and reform packages such as shock therapy advocated by western scholars were deemed as inappropriate and self-destructive in nature. Hence, the way of introducing changes was a major challenge and was left to the Chinese government to handle.

Reconciling change and continuity became a core concern in the reforming processes, and the essence was to balance new and existing values and interests so reforms would create incentives, trust, and support instead of incurring chaos, unaffordable costs, and resistance. Different contexts may have different ways to weigh and balance different values (Wal and Yang, 2014). There are four major generalizable principles, beside others, to reconcile change and continuity in Chinese public administration. These principles often prefer an ordered, controlled, and step-wise approach to introducing changes.

The first principle was to keep administrative reforms as means of enhancing the political regime. Maintaining, strengthening, and improving political leadership of the CPC was consistently recognized as one essential goal of administrative reforms. During China's socioeconomic transformation, changes and adjustments in the administrative system should aim at enhancing the capacities of the CPC to lead an emerging market economy and civil society. Consequently, the western tenet of the politics-administration dichotomy was never adopted despite some experiments in this vein in the 1980s. For administrative reform ideas and measures, a top feasibility criterion was its impact on party leadership. One example was China's civil service reform. China gradually brought in modern civil service institutions that fundamentally declined the idea of political neutrality. Civil service was integrated with the existing cadre personnel management system, seeking a synergy between professional competence and political loyalty (Chan, 2007). The majority of civil servants were party members, and their political loyalty and activism were treated as a basic source as well as an indicator of job performance.

The second principle was the reform sequence. China's administrative reforms followed a rule of least resistance, namely: to start from relatively easy issues and local areas, and to start with partial and informal changes. A positive-feedback learning process was emphasized to produce information, knowledge, trust, and support through success stories, and to keep incessant dynamic reforms. For example, the economic powers of local governments were gradually expanded so that they could make more and bigger decisions. Citizens' economic rights were also gradually recognized and legalized so they could run and own enterprises. A linear process of progress was expected although linear changes may result in major adjustments. For example, a fiscal contracting system was adopted in the 1980s to provide economic incentives to provinces. Such a discretion-based system encountered continuous adjustments until in 1994 was replaced by a rule-based tax-assignment system (Wang, 1997). Likewise, the tax-assignment system was continuously adjusted, such as the changes to individual income tax, business tax, and value-added tax.

The third principle was pragmatic informalism. Due to the aforementioned reform sequence, administrative reforms in China were often informal and ad hoc aiming at specific issues. Consequently, there was a lack of legal justification, policy coordination, and comprehensive design. In other words, reforms

were often experiments that violated existing laws and policies. Hence, a tacit “green light” had to exist to encourage reforms with goodwill and the right direction. Since the 1980s, an active pro-innovation culture emerged in the public sector in China that awarded risk-taking officials. The central government tended to be tolerant of local innovations and would promote successful ones as national policies or laws. It also used experiments (*shi dian*) for evidence-based policy making (Heilmann, 2008). The pragmatic informalism provided credibility for incessant reforms despite the slowness in adjusting the legal system and allowed the existence of many “dual tracks” and “special zones”. It also allowed for ad hoc and particular solutions to specific conditions and problems despite the hardness to manage the potentially excessive flexibility and lack of formal standards (Tang and Lo, 2009).

The fourth principle was an emphasis on the positive-sum game. Reforms could create winners and losers. Those that created pure losers and hurt veto-players may not sustain. China’s administrative reforms tended to use incentives instead of coercion to solve difficult issues and took multiple strategies to avoid direct confrontation (Jing and Zhang, 2019). For example, major administrative downsizing happened in the 1990s. Downsized personnel were given choices such as early retirement (with enhanced pension), transfer to public service units and state-owned enterprises, higher-education opportunities, and retraining and reemployment in the market sector. For major projects like the Three-Gorge Dam Project, the relocation of local residents was embedded in a major poverty alleviation program.

These four principles highlight the inherent logic of incremental reforms in the balancing of values. Reform sequence, by adopting step-wise changes, emphasizes gradual changes to guarantee the protection of vested interests. Political leadership emphasizes political values and is often characterized by formalism, while pragmatism emphasizes values related to development and is often characterized by the pursuit of practical results such as efficiency, effectiveness, and economy. A delicate balance between political and pragmatic values is critical to the viability of incremental reforms. Such a balance is reflected in reform results – a positive sum game indicates that actors representing different values may continue their collaboration. Hence, incremental reforms often feature continuous changes or changes with continuity.

Since human rationality often prefers gradual instead of radical changes, why could incremental reform succeed in China but fail in many other transitional contexts? There existed some favorable factors in China. First, the administrative system was not yet mature. Rules, procedures, responsibilities, and functional boundaries were not hardened and had to change due to the vast changes in the economy and society. As the economy continued to grow, market-facilitating administrative reforms made the bureaucracy one among the residue claimants and could manipulate new resources to induce compliance and cooperation. Second, there was a strong party that was determined to maintain a virtuous balance between development, reform, and stability. The CPC could exercise fine-tuning on incremental reform processes and avoid being captured by special interests. Third was the learning from radical reform in Russia. It was generally believed

that radical reforms would not be able to achieve the desired transitions in the short-run and long-run. Finally, China's cultural traditions and institutional context were supportive. As a society favoring informal rules, relations, examples, and rituals over formal rules, law-driven reforms, and radical changes would easily lead to mess, disaffection, and failures.

Recent administrative reforms (2013–2022): An evaluation

While incremental reform has been largely effective in shaping China's public administration since 1978, its viability has been under challenge in the recent decade. In 2013, the CPC Secretary General Jinping Xi announced that reforms had stepped into a 'deep-water zone' that weakened or disabled old reform strategies. In the same year, the modernization of state governance (*guojia zhili xiandaihua*) was proposed as a general blueprint of public sector reforms. In 2022 during the 20th party congress, the China-Style Modernization was proposed to summarize China's post-1978 modernization and its recent trajectories. Hence, the period between 2013 and 2022 provides a vantage point to examine the recent trends of administrative reforms.

The reason for the change in reform agendas in the last decade was not only the change in leadership but also the very different government contexts. First, the old economic development model was no longer sustainable. Trade conflicts, population ageing, environmental degradation and innovation deficits ended decades of fast economic growth and led to a new economic normal (Chen and Groenewold, 2019). Fiscal prosperity was gradually replaced by fiscal austerity. A positive-sum game became increasingly unlikely due to the scarcity of public resources and low growth expectations. Nonetheless, China's economic power gradually decreased the centrality of economic development and increased the priority of other values such as environmental sustainability. A second factor was the increasing complexity, uncertainty and risks of Chinese governance. As society became wealthier, more diverse and more rule-bound, the socioeconomic interdependence meant that incremental reforms were unlikely to produce results. Comprehensive reforms became indispensable. The government faced the dilemma of balancing the values of good governance such as transparency, efficiency, citizen participation, accountability, responsiveness and the rule of law. External governance practices were increasingly inapplicable to China, which faced new and unprecedented issues, such as digital transformation, carbon neutralization, and mega-city development. A third factor was the growing awareness of its own identity and the pursuit for institutional autonomy. The CPC strongly promoted self-confidence in the Chinese way and the Chinese system both domestically and internationally. For example, through the Belt Road Initiative, the Chinese government promised to provide global public goods by building global infrastructures and sharing best political and governance practices.

As a result, deficiencies of incremental reform unfolded in past decades. Emphasis on stability and gradualism may miss the opportunity for reform. Important reforms may be delayed, for example, the delay in adjusting administrative agencies in charge of population control policies. Reform without long-term plans and

legal guidelines was of much uncertainty. Pragmatic informalism may not support the growth of the rule of law and make it irreversible. Transitional interests could be institutionalized and become barriers to future reforms. Finally, it got very hard to align the reform pace in different and interdependent sectors so partial reform got less likely to achieve anything.

Four areas of public administration are analyzed in the following to examine evolving balance between change and continuity. First, politics-administration relations. There has been a trend of further integration. Both political leadership and direct supervision of the CPC were embedded into the basic design, operation, and restructuring of the administrative system. Politicization was deemed not only important for steering political directions but also instrumental in promoting professional competence. One example was the political campaign for poverty alleviation (Liao et al., 2019). Compared to the major administrative reforms in 2013, administrative reforms in 2018 were just part of the reforms of party and state institutions (*dang he guojia jigou gaige*). The 2018 reform was the first time in the past four decades to have CPC institutions and government institutions in one reform package, highlighting a new trend to directly coordinate institutions under the State Council and under the Central Committee of the CPC (Jing, 2020).

Under this reform package, the National Supervisory Commission was merged with the CPC Central Disciplinary Inspection Commission; the National Civil Service Administration of the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security was placed under the CPC Central Organization Department; the news and publication functions of the National Radio and Television Administration were transferred to the CPC Central Publicity Department; and the National Religious Affairs Administration and the National Ethnic Affairs Commission were placed under the CPC Central United Front Work Department. These were representative cases of integration between administrative and party agencies. Institutional integration also extended to interagency coordination areas. One notable example was that in early 2020 the CPC established a leading group in response to the COVID-19 virus outbreak. In contrast, the State Council established a leading group against SARS in 2003 (Jing, 2020). Clearly, the boundary between political and administrative affairs got vague and less important.

The operation of administrative agencies was also further politicized. There were increasing ideological learning and management of civil servants, expansion of party powers within administrative agencies, and increasing politics-based responsibilities and accountabilities. Anti-corruption, auditing, inspection, and political mobilization were used to strengthen the “political awareness” of officials. Specially, political performance became a major criterion in cadre personnel management. Given China’s performance culture in the public sector (Chan and Gao, 2013; Dong and Kübler, 2021), decisive compliance with and active enforcement of political policies regardless of varying local conditions and issue natures became a first priority in a rigorous hierarchical system.

Secondly, system coordination. Administrative coordination has been strengthened in the last decade through centralization. The gradual reform has both exploited and magnified the fragmentation of the system. The means of hor-

horizontal and vertical coordination were often based on a logic of centralization. Horizontally, organizational reforms were introduced to tackle China's siloed administrative systems (Scott and Gong, 2021). The super-ministry reorganization was deepened (Dong, Christensen and Painter, 2010). In 2013, the Ministry of Railway was revoked, and its administrative functions were merged into the super Ministry of Transport. In 2018, the super National Health Commission was formed after integrating functions from the abolished National Health and Family Planning Commission and from other agencies. The Ministry of Nature Resources, the Ministry of Ecology and Environment, and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs were reconstructed under the principle of functional integration as well. As aforementioned, super-ministry reorganization spanned the boundary between administrative and political agencies. Interagency leading groups got more frequently used. The Chinese government and the CPC had a tradition to establish interagency leading groups headed by major government or party leaders and composed of administrative and party agencies with a purpose to handle complex issues (Chen, 2019). Since 2013, a major trend has been the proliferation of powerful leading groups established by the CPC Central Committee that dealt with major political, administrative, and socio-economic issues, such as the newly established the Commission for Comprehensively Deepening Reform, the Cyberspace Affairs Commission, and the Commission for Law-based Governance. In fact, the Commission for Comprehensively Deepening Reform was authorized to coordinate the recent 2023 reforms on party and state institutions.

Vertical intergovernmental relations showed a dual trend of centralization and decentralization. On the one hand, along with the emphasis on concentrated and unified leadership (*jizhong tongyi lingdao*) of the CPC, central powers and top-down accountabilities were strengthened, especially in issues with political sensitivity and implications. Top design (*dingceng sheji*) became a keyword in the post-2012 reforms, indicating the priority of central policies and directions in setting general frameworks of changes and reforms. Decentralization led to "a noted reduction in local policy experimentation" (Teets, Hasmath and Lewis, 2017). Nonetheless, the inertia of decentralization still existed and was best reflected by the *fang guan fu* reform advanced in 2015 by the State Council. *Fang* was to delegate powers to local governments and repeal government powers without clear legal grounds through the reform of the administrative examination and approval system. *Guan* was to reduce and improve regulation. *Fu* was to enhance service-oriented government and provide better services to citizens.

Third, state-market and state-society relations. Changes in this period tended to highlight a state-centered approach. Liberal management as a reform trend in both economic and social areas still received support during this period. The biggest push was the *fang guan fu* reform advanced by the central government in 2015, aiming for less regulation and better services. "Internet+" national strategy, adopted in 2015 as well, showed a complex policy making process in which private internet companies were engaged in constructive ways (Jing and Li, 2019). The plenary report of the 19th CPC Congress held in 2017 proposed to build a co-established, co-governed, and co-enjoyed social management structure. The scale

of cooperation between the government, private sector, and social organizations in providing public projects and services had been expanding. Between 2014 and 2022, there were 6,651 executed public-private partnership (PPP) projects in China that involved a total investment of RMB 11 trillion¹. In 2020, government procurement of services in China exceeded RMB 1.03 trillion².

Nonetheless, the ascending emphasis on centralized party leadership extended into economic and social areas. There were intensified efforts to cover all kinds of organizations with CPC's political leadership and direct supervision. Building party branches in private enterprises, social organizations, and residential communities was rigorously enforced. In economic areas, private actors faced more restrictions. Among the list of China's Top 500 Enterprises according to sales revenues, private enterprises have increased from 190 in 2012 in number to 226 and 242 in 2017 and 2022, and their sales revenues have increased from 18.1% to 28.2% and 30.8% in the same period. The trend was clear that the quick growth of private enterprises in the spire of the economic pyramid was repressed³. In 2020, the Politbureau of CPC proposed to prevent the "disorder of capital expansion" (*ziben wuxu kuozhang*), and imposed regulations on capital operations of private enterprises, for example, to freeze the plan of the Ant Group to be listed in the Shanghai Stock Market. During the three-year pandemic in China and under intense China-US economic and high-tech competition, the burgeoning trend of Chinese private enterprises declined much. Such a trend was copied in the social area as well. For example, Urban Residents' Committees (URCs) usually take a dual-agent role as both policy implementers of grassroots governments and self-governance representatives of local residents (Read, 1999). Intensified party construction further strengthened their implementer role, and this role was intensified during the pandemic period when URCs were overburdened with the tasks of community pandemic prevention and control. Meanwhile, the long-advocated autonomy of social organizations has not improved significantly. Their cooperation with governments via social service contracting further demonstrated a state-centered approach (Jing et al., 2021).

Fourth, technical upgrading. Active technical adoption in the public sector offered a new capacity to the administrative system to serve its empowerment and control purposes. Technologies such as artificial intelligence, big data, and 5G have pushed forward the digital transformation in public administration and unfolded the potential of realizing good governance through digital co-production, value creation, and interlocal collaboration (Mu, Wang and Song, 2022;

¹ Data source: China Public Private Partnerships Center. National PPP Integrated Information Platform Project Management Database. Available at: <https://www.cpppc.org:8082/inforpublic/homepage.html#/projectPublic> (accessed: 30 January 2023).

² Data source: The Ministry of Finance (2021). Summary of government procurement in 2020. Available at: http://gks.mof.gov.cn/tongjishuju/202109/t20210903_3750619.htm (accessed: 30 January 2023).

³ Data are from China's Top 500 Enterprises List in 2012, 2017 and 2022 released by China Enterprise Confederation and China Enterprise Directors Association. Available at: China's Top 500 Enterprises List 2012: http://www.cec1979.org.cn/view_sy.php?id=10435
China's Top 500 Enterprises List 2017: http://www.cec1979.org.cn/view_sy.php?id=34838
China's Top 500 Enterprises List 2022: http://www.cec1979.org.cn/view_sy.php?id=50199 (accessed: 30 January 2023).

Wang and Fan, 2022). Local governments like Shanghai Municipality and Zhejiang Province took the lead and erected digital public services programs such as the “Government Online-Offline Shanghai” program and the “Visit Once” program (Huang and Yu, 2019), using ICT technologies to integrate the fragmented public service system and improve service delivery and citizen satisfaction. For such purposes, most Chinese provinces have established their digital government agencies or mechanisms and made efforts to adapt to the new virtual working environment. Government official blogs and WeChat accounts prospered and disseminated information promptly. A recent development is that the National Data Administration was established in 2023. As a result, a global ranking of China in e-government has improved fast. In 2022, China ranked 43rd among 193 member states in the E-Government Development Index (EGDI); and 12th in the E-Participation Index (EPI), according to the UN. In the E-Government survey 2022, Shanghai was ranked 10th in the Local Online Service Index (LOSI) among 193 major cities around the world⁴.

Meanwhile, technologies were also used to exercise new ways of social control. Digitalization afforded unprecedented capacities for the government to access individual information and impose precise and instant control in areas such as anti-corruption, crime control, traffic regulation, and communicable disease control. Shortly after the Wuhan pandemic outbreak in the end of 2019, cellphone-based digital personal health code was invented to provide nucleic acid test information and other related health information. It then functioned as one major instrument for the government to regulate citizen mobility and enforce pandemic policies. All public and private facilities, as well as transportation lines and vehicles, were incorporated into a national code system so personal health status and mobility information would be monitored in real time. Such a digital system made it almost impossible for a person to use public transport system, go shopping, or travel without abiding by government’s pandemic-control policies. Nonetheless, digitalization can also have unintended consequences. One case was the abuse of the health code system during the pandemic. On June 22, 2022, the Disciplinary Inspection Commission of Zhengzhou Municipality CPC Party Committee issued a report that announced its investigation into some local officials and the disciplinary actions taken against them. These officials intentionally changed the health code of 1,317 depositors of some Community Banks in Henan Province to red, and essentially deprived them of the freedom to move. Some of these depositors were going to Zhengzhou Municipality to appeal to government as they could not withdraw cash from these banks.

Table 1 summarizes the four areas of administrative reforms according to the aforementioned four principles of incremental reform. Apparently, changes were still introduced in gradual ways reflected by reform sequence, yet the internal balance between politicization and pragmatism across these four areas was tilted in favor of the former. In other words, under an apparent trend of politicization,

⁴ Data source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2022). E-Government Survey 2022. pp. 214, 253, 259. Retrieved from <https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/en-us/Reports/UN-E-Government-Survey-2022> (Accessed 30 January 2023).

pragmatism was less emphasized, and a win-win situation got less likely among actors representing politicization and pragmatism. If these trends of reform remain, then further reforms, despite their incremental manner, may cumulate internal tensions that may result in triggering points for the public administration system to go through fundamental changes.

Table 1

Reform trends in the past decade, 2013–2022

	Politics-administration relations	System coordination	State-market-society relations	Technical upgrading
Political centralization	More	More	More but limitedly bidirectional	More
Reform sequence	Step-wise	Step-wise	Bidirectional	Step-wise but quick
Pragmatism	Toward formalism	Toward formalism	Toward state centrism	Dual emphasis
Winners	Party agencies	Central agencies	State agencies, mixed	Mixed

Sources: Completed by the authors.

Conclusions and discussions

The administrative system of China, a country with a government-oriented tradition, plays a central role in China's socioeconomic development. Since 1978, this system has been undergoing incremental reform, which highlights a delicate reconciliation of system continuity and change so that various values and interests could be balanced and reform, stability and development could mutually support each other in a long process of evolution. Incremental reforms are characterized by loyalty to the party leadership, appropriate sequencing of reforms, pragmatic informalism and an emphasis on positive – sum game. The immaturity of the administrative system, availability of a strong party, learning from external precedents, and China's cultural traditions and institutional contexts have favored incremental reforms, which have been widely recognized as one major factor that accounted for China's governance performance and economic miracle.

However, there is a genuine question of whether incremental reform remained effective as China moved into the 'deep-water zone' with increasing difficulty to introduce gradual changes due to the unsustainability of the old economic development model, the increasing complexity, uncertainty and risks of governance issues, and the increasing awareness of self-identity and pursuit for institutional autonomy. Incremental reform had been facing challenges such as the delay of important reforms, lack of long-term plans and predictability, disfavor of rule of law, and lack of policy coordination. Consequently, the CPC's proposal of the modernization of state governance in 2013 and the China-Style Modernization in 2022 reflected a need for new reform strategies.

The analysis of four major areas of recent-decade administrative reforms shows that incremental reform has been largely kept. Politics-administration relations, system coordination, state-market and state-society relations, and digital governance, as examples, demonstrated inertia to move along established reform trajectories. A foremost trend was the continuous politicization of the administrative system that has fundamentally shaped its structures, procedures, and people. As a consequence, the system tended to be more centralized, more politics-driven instead of rule-driven, control-oriented instead of incentive-oriented, and state-centric instead of market-friendly.

How will these changes affect the success of incremental reform? China's success in the past was characterized by a coexistence of political centralization and economic decentralization and, in other words, a balance between reform, development, and stability. The strong political commitment to a development state and a pursuit of performance legitimacy played as control valves to align the pressures of politics. As China's economic success resulted, in an unanticipated way, in the decline of the importance of development, these political pressure in the system was unleashed and broke the delicate balance. Incremental reform thus may get difficult to achieve good performance and results despite the manner of introducing continuous changes.

Acknowledgements.

This work is supported by Key Project of the National Natural Science Foundation of China (Grant 72234001) and the Major Project of the Ministry of Education of China (Grant 21JZD034).

REFERENCE

1. Allison, G. T. (1969) 'Conceptual models and the Cuban Missile Crisis', *The American Political Science Review*, 63(3), pp. 689–718.
2. Aufrecht, S.E. and Bun, L.S. (1995) 'Reform with Chinese characteristics: The context of Chinese civil service reform', *Public Administration Review*, 55(2), pp. 175–182.
3. Chan, H.S. (2007) 'Civil service law in the PRC: A return to cadre personnel management', *Public Administration Review*, 67(3), pp. 383–398.
4. Chan, H.S. and Gao, J. (2013) 'Can the same key open different locks? Administrative values underlying performance measurement in China', *Public Administration*, 91(2), pp. 366–380.
5. Chen, A.P. and Groenewold, N. (2019) 'China's 'New Normal': Is the growth slowdown demand- or supply-driven?', *China Economic Review*, 58, DOI:10.1016/j.chieco.2018.07.009.

6. Chen, F. (2019) 'Local state adhocacy: Infrastructural power and stability maintenance in grassroots China', *Problems of Post-Communism*, 67(2), pp.180–192.
7. David, P. A. (1985) 'Clio and the economics of QWERTY', *American Economic Review*, 75(2), 332–337.
8. Dong, L.S., Christensen, T. and Painter, M. (2010) 'A case study of China's administrative reform: The importation of the super-department', *The American Review of Public Administration*, 40(2), pp. 170–188.
9. Dong, L.S. and Kübler, D. (2021) 'Government performance, political trust, and citizen subjective well-being: Evidence from rural China', *Global Public Policy and Governance*, 1(4), pp. 383–400.
10. Hannan, M. T. and Freeman, J. (1984) 'Structural inertia and organizational change', *American Sociological Review*, 49(2), 149–164.
11. Heilmann, S. (2008) 'From local experiments to national policy: The origins of China's distinctive policy process', *The China Journal*, 59(1), pp. 1–30.
12. Huang, B. and Yu, J.X. (2019) 'Leading digital technologies for coproduction: The case of "Visit Once" administrative service reform in Zhejiang Province, China', *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, 24(3), pp. 513–532.
13. Jing, Y.J. (2017) 'The transformation of Chinese governance: Pragmatism and incremental adaption', *Governance*, 30(1), pp. 37–43.
14. Jing, Y.J. (2020) 'Marching through the deep-water zone: Chinese public sector reforms and the way forwards', *Public Management Review*, 23(4), pp. 475–482.
15. Jing, Y.J. and Li, D.Y. (2019) 'Private roles in enhancing Multi-Level Governance: China's "Internet+" national strategy', *Public Policy and Administration*, 34(2), pp. 144–164.
16. Jing, Y.J., Torenvlied, R., van Gerven, M. and Cao, J. (2021) 'Nonprofit contracting and partnership in elderly care: A comparison between China and the Netherlands', *Global Public Policy and Governance*, 1(2), pp. 136–158.
17. Liao, X.M., Tsai, W.H. and Lin, Z.W. (2019) 'Penetrating the grassroots: First-Secretaries-in-Residence and rural politics in contemporary China', *Problems of Post-Communism*, 67(2), pp. 169–179.
18. Lindblom, C. (1959) 'The science of "muddling through"', *Public Administration Review*, 19(2), pp. 79–88.
19. Mu, R., Wang, Y. and Song, H. (2022) 'How does technological system design affect value creation? A systematic literature review of digital co-production', *Global Public Policy and Governance*, 2(4), pp. 400–426.
20. Pierson, P. (2000) 'Increasing returns, path dependence, and the study of politics', *American Political Science Review*, 94(2), pp. 251–267.
21. Read, B. (1999) 'Revitalizing the State's Urban 'Nerve Tips'', *The China Quarterly*, 163(1), pp. 806–820.
22. Scott, I. and Gong, T. (2021) 'Coordinating government silos: Challenges and opportunities', *Global Public Policy and Governance*, 1(1), pp. 20–38.

23. Herbert, S. (1957) *Administrative behavior: A study of decision-making processes in administrative organizations*. New York: MacMillan.
24. Tang, S.Y. and Lo, C.W. (2009) 'The political economy of service organization reform in China: An institutional choice analysis', *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 19(4), pp. 731–767.
25. Tang, X.Y. (2020) 'Co-evolutionary pragmatism: Re-examine 'China Model' and its impact on developing countries', *Journal of Contemporary China*, 29(126), pp. 853–870.
26. Teets, J.C., Hasmath, R. and Lewis, O.A. (2017) 'The incentive to innovate? The behavior of local policymakers in China', *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, 22(4), pp. 505–517.
27. Wal, Z.V. and Yang, L. (2014) 'Confucius Meets Weber or 'Managerialism Takes All'? Comparing civil servant values in China and the Netherlands', *International Public Management Journal*, 18(3), pp. 411–436.
28. Wang, S.G. (1997) 'China's 1994 fiscal reform: An initial assessment', *Asian Survey*, 37(9), pp. 801–817.
29. Wang, X.C. and Fan, Z.T. (2022) 'Understanding interlocal collaboration for service delivery for migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic: Evidence from Guangdong, China', *Public Management Review*, DOI: 10.1080/14719037.2022.2116095
30. Zhang, P. and Jing, Y.J. (2020) 'Strategies in adopting unpopular policies in China: the case of property tax reform', *Journal of Contemporary China*, 29(123), pp. 387–399.
31. Zheng, Y. (1999) 'Political incrementalism: political lessons from China's 20 years of reform', *Third World Quarterly*, 20(6), pp. 1157–1177.

The article was submitted: 06.02.2023;
 approved after reviewing: 26.07.2023;
 accepted for publication: 11.09.2023.