The Politics-Administration Relationships: A Comparison between Australia and China

Liang Ma
Ph.D. Student
Xi’an Jiaotong University
Email: ken0821@sohu.com

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Introduction

The relationships between politicians and executives, debated for almost half of the 20th century, lie in the heart of public administration (Svara 1998). Traditionally, the Webber’s style of politics-administration dichotomy is the underpinning of bureaucracy. In such arrangement, the main role of politicians is policy making, while administrators tackle the task of policy implementation (Rosenbloom 2008). Distinguishing their duties is the prerequisite of formal bureaucracy, and is also the requirement of social division of labor. The degree of separation is variable at different administrative levels and in different countries, showing the diversity of politics-administration relationships. For instance, their relations are intertwined in the United States while clarified in the British Commonwealth member countries.

The last quarter of the 20th century has witnessed the rise of the New Public Management (NPM) movement, in which the public demand running governments like business and reshaping the relations among politicians, administrators, markets, and citizens. The politics-administration relationships become a key issue when many countries are involved in the NPM movement (Box 1999). More recently, the strengthening role of administrators in the political process as well as the increasing involvement of politicians in process of policy implementation give birth to more emphases placed on their interaction and complementarities (Svara 2001; Demir 2009). How to reconcile the tensions between politicians and executives, however, is still an unsolved problem both in research and practice.

We aim to examine the politics-administration relationships in the short essay, comparing the approach Australia adopted and the state of the art of China. Our arguments principally focus on the issues at local and grassroots levels, though their universal application is also discussed. The Australia’s experience in tackling the politics-administration relationships are initatively introduced, which is followed by the summary of key issues Chinese local governments encountered. Preliminary
recommendations are then proposed, and lastly future research directions are depicted.

**Australia’ approach**

There are lots of similarities and differences between Australia and China, which merit comparison and mutual imitation. What Australia has explored and accumulated during the past century mainly lie in its underpinning institutional arrangement. The institutional arrangement of political and administrative regime in Australia can be summarized as following (Podger 2009):

First, the partial separation of powers among legislature, executive, and judiciary. Similarly to other Western countries, the power distribution among legislature, executive, and judiciary is specific in Australia, which is essential for power balance and healthy evolution of their relationships.

Second, the distinctive duties of politicians and executives of the government. Focusing on the relations between politicians and executives, we can find their relatively clarified positions and interrelations. They have different duties and career channel, and some sorts of overlap are permitted.

Lastly, the independence of professional, apolitical, and merit based civil servants. The professionalism of civil service becomes more and more significant for public administration, which is what the Government of Australia fostered at its birth.

The attributes mentioned above are fundamental regime of Australia, which determine other properties of institutions building on.

**Relevance to China**

The politics-administration relationships in China are profoundly different from most Western countries. Although China has a long tradition of merit-based, professional civil service in the ancient times, the revolution and reform during the last century approximately destroyed it. The lack of professional administration gives birth to what I termed ‘politics-politics relationships,’ the relations between secretaries of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) committees and governors of governments, which
are mixed and complicated with the focal politics-administration relationships.

The separation of their positions and roles (Dangzheng fenli) has been one of the key political reform agendas at the end of 1980s. The duality of party secretary and governor become increasingly less and less, though it’s relatively more at the lower levels. However, their separation generated new issues in practice (Guo 2001). The overlapped duties between party secretary and governor result in their role ambiguity and conflict. Their positions are exchangeable, for party secretaries can be promoted to the positions of governor at the upper level, and governors can be transferred to other regions or promoted as party secretaries. Power struggle is harmful for the operation of government. The emerging of factions belonging to the two leaders is also harmful for their collaboration in the operation of public affairs. The issues of accountability also emerge, since who should be held accountable by who for what is not distinct. Governors are punished for their wrongdoings in most cases, as shown in news reports, and may become scapegoats of decision mistakes by party secretaries.

The intertwined relationships between party secretary and governor are complex and demonstrate varieties among different levels of government and diverse functional departments. For example, more professional departments, such as auditing, statistics, education, science, industry regulations, are dominant by executives rather than party secretaries; whereas in more political and less professional departments, the voice of party secretaries is louder than governors. The variation may reflect the dual requirements of ‘redness’ and ‘expertness’ (political honesty and executive professionalism, youhong youzhuan) in Mao China, which disappeared slowly in the ear of reform and opening up. Their relations in the real world depend on their power distribution and cognitions, though there are some formal regulations on division of labor. Further more, the adoption of democratic election at the grassroots complicates their relations. For instance, the relationships between village head and party secretary have changed when public election is institutionalized. At township level, experiments of direct election also restructured the interaction between government executive and party secretary.

As an old Chinese proverb says, ‘One mountain cannot abide two tigers (yishan
burong erhu). The power struggle between party secretaries and governors can be regarded as two tigers coexist on one mountain, and their conflict and fight is inevitable. Their relative power positions can be described simply in a matrix, in which four choices emerge (as shown in figure 1). In the ideal design by central policymakers, party secretaries make policies and governors implement policies and provide policy advices. However, their power distribution and relations are contingent by several external, organizational, and individual factors, and may deviate from what the central policymakers would like to see. The formally regulated division of power and roles usually conflicts with their cognitive competency and personal perceptions, which is also the roots of contradiction.

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<th>Party Secretary</th>
<th>Governor</th>
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<td>Strong-Weak</td>
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<td>(Party secretary-Governor)</td>
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Figure 1 Power struggle: two tigers within one mountain?

At the village level, for instance and easy to understand, the implementation of public direct elections in 1999 raises more complex problems, particularly issues around the structure of power and the relations between the village committees and the party branches (Guo and Bernstein 2004). Previously, both party secretaries and village head are appointed by township governments, and their relations are principally harmonious due to their common interests and sources of power. Village committee chairmen are elected by the villagers and increasingly behave on behalf of villagers after the reform of election systems, however, make their relations with the still appointed party secretaries worsened. Though villagers’ congresses can be involved in their interaction as the third tiger, however, they are not standing committees and at best paper tigers right now.
Though what we try to depict are not wholly equivalent to compare among Australia and China, the experience of Australia is still valuable for our reference. The control of the CCP on leading cadres has not been weakened during the last decades, or rather strengthened by the means of personnel management (Chan 2004). The relationships between party and state cadres are still one of the fundamental reform agendas in the future of China. The following preliminary recommendations emerge from the above discussions.

First, the professionalism of executives ought to be enhanced, though their entrance may generate potentially complicated conflict. The core element of Australia’s experience is the merit-based, professional civil service, which is also what China should be equipped.

Second, the complementarity of political appointees and career executives should be considered seriously when they are selected and combined together, and when they are actually interacted. ‘One size does not fit all.’ Both of their separation and duality are optional and dependent on the situations faced.

Lastly but not least, the ‘voice and exit’ rights of citizens should be promoted and
enlarged to the processes of the CCP committee, which will contribute to the accountability of cadres as well as their consciousness.

References


