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Civic Engagement in the Performance Evaluation of the Public Sector in China

Bennis Wai Yip So [a]
[a] Department of Public Administration , National Chengchi University , Taipei , Taiwan
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Abstract

This article accounts for the logic of building of an accountability mechanism with elements of civic engagement in an authoritarian regime. It is elaborated by a performance evaluation programme 'Democratic Review of Administrative and Business Style' (DRABS) in Wuhan in central China. The author argues that the DRABS does help form government agencies' responsiveness to the public with various public scrutiny instruments including mass media and the internet, and that it is more accurate to frame the mechanism as having the function of *building horizontal accountability to enhance vertical accountability*.

Key words

Civic engagement, performance, horizontal accountability, vertical accountability, China

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN THE PERFORMANCE EVALUATION OF THE PUBLIC SECTOR IN CHINA

Building horizontal accountability to enhance vertical accountability

Bennis Wai Yip So

Bennis Wai Yip So
Department of Public Administration
National Chengchi University
Taipei
Taiwan
E-mail: bennisso@nccu.edu.tw

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INTRODUCTION

China is governed by an authoritarian regime under one-party rule. In principle, the ruling party only needs to build up a vertical line of bureaucratic accountability to ensure bureaucratic compliance with its own political line. This usually works at the expense of public service performance due to the absence of public accountability. But there is evidence to show that the ruling Communist Party in China does not totally ignore the building of mechanisms of public accountability. In some localities in China, experiments have been conducted in the use of certain civic-engagement-oriented horizontal accountability mechanisms that were advocated and developed in democracies at the end of the last century. All of the practices being implemented in China are government-initiated without any citizen-initiated efforts like the performance assessment in Iowa and the public sector oversight institution in India (Goetz and Jenkins, 2001; Ho and Coates, 2004). These experiments in China are sometimes embodied in some regular or ad hoc performance evaluation movements. The use of this kind of performance evaluation with elements of civic engagement is relatively significant for China in the sense that it is considered a sort of substitute for direct elections in that it works to a certain extent as a way to evaluate the government by the use of public balloting (Zheng *et al.*, 2008). However, why do the non-elected local officials make such a move? One should note that the mechanism does not stand alone to steer the behaviour of the bureaucracy. It works in tandem with a regular top-down managerial performance measurement that is used to hold government agencies vertically accountable. What is the effect of such an amalgam of vertical–horizontal accountability in an authoritarian regime?

This article attempts to examine the impact of the public evaluation of government performance on the enhancement of public accountability in China. The viewpoints of this article will be elaborated by a discussion of the findings from a case study of 'Democratic Review of Administrative and Business Style' (DRABS) in Wuhan. The DRABS is a typical kind of performance evaluation with elements of civic engagement in China. The review was originally designed to have a kind of external oversight function, but in practice some local governments have retrofitted it to provide a more comprehensive evaluation of performance.

The author argues that there is no doubt that the use of the review has established a line of horizontal accountability that forces government agencies to directly respond to accountability holders outside the bureaucratic hierarchy. At the same time, the use of such a mechanism can be interpreted as a manoeuvre by government leaders at the top echelon to enhance the vertical accountability of subordinate bureaucrats. It shares the spirit of the past practice of combating bureaucratism by mobilizing the masses during the pre-reform era.

VERTICAL–HORIZONTAL DIVIDE OF ACCOUNTABILITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY FOR PERFORMANCE AND THEIR RELEVANCE TO CHINA

Accountability has become a catchphrase representing an essential element of the building of good governance for an organization or a society. The building of public accountability is further a hallmark of democratic governance. But accountability is a complex and multifaceted concept that can be defined in a myriad of ways in different contexts. According to the generic definition offered by Mark Bovens (2005: 184), accountability refers to 'a social relationship in which an actor feels an obligation to explain and to justify his or her conduct to some significant other'. By the same token, in the public domain accountability is 'a relationship in which an individual or agency is held to answer for performance that involves some delegation of authorities to act' (Romzek and Dubnick, 1998: 6). Government officials, as accountability holdees, need to manage expectations of diverse accountability holders. The former are supposed to perform the delegated tasks to satisfy the latter in the sense of bureaucratic, legal, professional or/and political accountability (Romzek and Dubnick, 1998). Such an act is a function to demonstrate official trustworthiness to the public (Uhr, 1993).

In a traditional electoral democracy, public accountability is realized through an upward hierarchal chain where frontline bureaucrats are accountable to their direct superiors; government agencies are accountable to their supervisory ministries; and the ministries are accountable to the parliament, and ultimately to the voters. Hence, in principle, there is no need for the frontline bureaucracy to be directly accountable to the public. But such form of 'vertical' accountability has been giving way to more diversified and pluralistic forms of accountability since the end of the last century (Bovens, 2005).

A different form termed 'horizontal' accountability has been called for to remedy the deficiencies of vertical accountability for the first time by O'Donnell (1999). He developed the concept in his research on democracy in Latin America, where its use was advocated to allow for the enhancement of external control over the executive branch by other state branches including the courts and the legislature. Such an external control does not coincide neatly with the principal–agent relationship in the vertical accountability, but such a definition of horizontal accountability has been recently extended to refer to all kinds of external control by 'third parties' including semi-autonomous agencies, independent evaluators, journalists, interest groups and clients (Schillemans, 2011). And it focuses on the accountability of individual government agencies rather than on the executive branch as a whole (Schillemans, 2008). The building of horizontal accountability is aimed at compensating for the inadequacy of vertical accountability in which the principal at the apex of bureaucratic pyramid finds it difficult to fully hold government agencies accountable for their performance.

The theoretical foundation of such a horizontal line of control derives from two lines of thought. Taking a market-oriented approach, the ideology of New Public

Management (NPM) advocates privatization, contracting out and deregulation to hold public service providers accountable to customers through a (quasi-)market mechanism (Paul, 1992) and advocates agentification to replace a vertically hierarchal relationship with a horizontally contractual relationship between policy-level agencies and executive/service delivery agencies (Thomas, 1998; Bovens, 2005). The building of horizontal accountability from a participatory approach is aimed to give clients, stakeholders and citizens a 'voice', instead of the 'choices' advocated by the NPM, in order to monitor the performance of the agencies and to enhance the participation of citizens (especially the disadvantaged) in public governance (Goetz and Jenkins, 2001). This version of horizontal accountability is usually associated with forms of deliberative democracy in which some instruments such as consensus conference and citizen jury are developed to engage the general public in deliberation.

A point common to the two approaches is that the building of horizontal accountability is a setting for the formation of a mechanism whereby executive agencies are directly responsive to the public rather than being indirectly responsive through a hierarchical chain under the vertical line of accountability. In addition, such a horizontal line of accountability is now designed not only to avoid abuse or misuse of public power but also to help spur good performance by the agencies – accountability for performance (Behn, 2001). In this regard, the degree of citizen satisfaction with public services as a measure of performance, which can be obtained by citizen surveys, is considered as a way to realize the ideas of deliberative democracy and to encourage dialogue between the citizens and government officials in the US experiences (Miller and Kobayashi, 2000). This arrangement of *ex post facto* performance evaluation by the public in contrast to that of *ex ante* performance measurement by the management is found to be a more effective way to stimulate organizational learning, and thus to promote improvements in performance (van Dooren *et al.*, 2010; Schillemans, 2011).

What has been discussed in the foregoing seems to have nothing to do with an authoritarian regime like the one in China. It may be argued that the current agenda for discussion should prioritize democratization rather than public accountability for China. However, there is strong evidence to prove that besides enforcing top-down mechanisms for the measurement of performance that only hold agencies accountable to the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP), some local governments in China have also been experimenting with certain practices since the 1990s that enforce some sorts of public accountability and citizen participation to improve the process of policy-making in the absence of electoral democracy, which have drawn some scholarly attention, examining how far the CCP installs a 'real' democracy into China (Chou, 2009; He and Thøgersen, 2010; Wu and Wang, 2012). Some of these practices dubbed as 'authoritarian deliberation' by He (2006a), including deliberative polling, participatory budgeting, consultative and deliberative meeting, and citizen evaluation meeting, help build up a horizontal line of accountability with elements of civic engagement (He, 2006b; He and Thøgersen, 2010; He, 2011). According to various research findings,

the effects of the above experiments are mixed and vary from case to case. Some do show substantial democratic elements; some others become tools to strengthen authoritarian control (He, 2006b). In general, government officials now show more tolerance to public participation and are willing to solicit public opinions on some issues related to people's livelihood and occasionally allow the citizens' participation in procedural design, for example, in the case of participatory budgeting (Wu and Wang, 2012). But the process of participation in most cases is meticulously controlled by the authorities. The actual impact of public opinions on policy-making is not clear (Chou, 2009; He and Thøgersen, 2010).

Why does the CCP allow civic engagement? It is well-justified in the sense that it can not only help the CCP to contain rampant social discontent and conflict caused by economic reforms but also avoid the development of competitive democracy that may challenge the one-party rule of the CCP (He, 2006b). Moreover, public political participation is not alien to the Chinese as the CCP used to mobilize the masses for the purpose of fighting bureaucratism during the radical era before the 1980s (Harding, 1981). Hence, the issue of horizontal accountability-related civic engagement also pertains to China. However, most of the above experiments were initiated by local officials rather than central party leaders. Is there any rational logic for the local officials to pick up and use the tool of civic engagement? How do they set the parameter of tool wielding? This issue has not been well addressed so far. It is useful to account for it by juxtaposing the concept horizontal accountability with vertical accountability.

PERFORMANCE MOVEMENT FOR THE PUBLIC SECTOR IN CHINA

A top-down imposed measurement of the performance of government agencies had already been launched at the local level in China in the 1980s to help enforce various policies of the CCP. The measurement was directly linked to the appraisal of the performance of party and government officials who had signed a performance contract with their immediate superior authorities. The contract assigned the officials various targets concerning local economic development, maintaining local social and political tranquillity, birth control, tax collection, etc. The targets were quantified and some of them were set as priorities where the targets assigned had to be met. This so-called *Target Responsibility System* (TRS), which looks similar to the practice of 'management-by-objective' (MBO), was devised to ensure compliance from subordinate agencies, and was further enforced by a pressurized system with incentive and sanction measures, like promotion, monetary awards and bonuses if targets were attained or reprimand and loss of further promotion opportunities if they were not (Edin, 2003; Zhong, 2003; Whiting, 2004).

With the diffusion of ideas of the NPM from the 1990s onwards, public authorities in China increasingly absorbed certain NPM-inspired ideas and practices into their evaluation of performance of government agencies. An outstanding example was the experiment of

the Service Promise System in Yantai City from 1994, which mimicked the Citizen's Charter Programme in the United Kingdom. The System later became a model for other cities to emulate (Foster, 2006), including the case of Wuhan in this article. The TRS has been further refined to become a more systematic and comprehensive nationwide evaluation system since the 1990s with common broad performance scopes assigned by the central government (Gao, 2009). To date, however, the evaluation system has never veered away from the basic line of MBO and has remained closely linked to the appraisal of leaders of government agencies. Even though local governments are allowed to exercise some discretion in tweaking the system, for example, where the evaluation sometimes contains a so-called 'third-party evaluation' that engages the general public, entrepreneurs and delegates from the People's Congress (PC) (the legislature in China) and the Political Consultative Conference (PCC) (a political advisory body) in the evaluation exercise, it still tends to operate in a top-down manner to enhance vertical (bureaucratic) accountability, with the aim of building state capacity and ensuring policy compliance rather than improving service to the public (Gao, 2009). It is further argued that the enhancement of accountability paradoxically works at the expense of improvements in performance (Chan and Gao, 2009).

In Wuhan, the existing performance management scheme for government agencies was launched in 2006. It is an annual assessment exercise, combining a quantitative measurement of the achievement of performance targets, a judgement-oriented performance appraisal by the top leaders of the city and a third-party evaluation. The third-party evaluation is conducted by use of a survey on the level of satisfaction of the general public and enterprises with the performance of the agencies. The survey tests the satisfaction level of respondents in terms of five dimensions: service attitude, work efficiency, transparency of administration, administration in accordance with the law and integrity.[1] However, the third-party evaluation usually accounts for only a minor share of the gross assessment score, and the five dimensions and the scale of rating (satisfied, basically satisfied, not satisfied and no idea) are too general and non-specific, so the validity of such a poorly designed survey is not high and it is further threatened by the uneven public access to different agencies. As a result, the third-party evaluation may make no more than a scintilla of impact on the behaviour of agencies. The assurance of vertical accountability remains the core of the mechanism.

Despite the feeble level of civic engagement in the regular performance evaluation exercise, there is a separate mechanism of civic engagement to evaluate the performance of government agencies, which may work to some effect in the building up of a line of horizontal accountability. That is citizen evaluation of performance. One popular practice is the so-called 'evaluation by tens of thousands of people'. The evaluation is usually conducted by use of a questionnaire survey of the local population, most of which are not randomly sampled.[2] Since originating in Zhuhai and Nanjing, two well-developed cities, in 1998, this kind of evaluation campaign has become scattered over every corner of China. Motivated by the desire to breaking through the bottleneck of

impediments to further economic development, which were partly attributed to the red tape and bureaucratism of government agencies, high-level local government leaders determined to make use of the power of the masses to combat and curb maladministration and various bureaupathologies (Xie, 2008). But while such a campaign-oriented evaluation movement was probably able to give a shot in the arm to the process, it could have only an ephemeral impact. More importantly, almost all of the agencies subject to the evaluation were able to pass the evaluation or unreasonably clinch quite high levels of satisfaction, so the reliability and validity of the evaluation were highly suspected (Xie, 2008). It cannot discriminate good performers from bad ones well.

Moreover, such a government-initiated citizen evaluation of performance is believed to be manipulated by the government. In addition, the information asymmetry between the subject of the evaluation and the evaluator makes the latter a poorly informed evaluator who is unable to accurately assess the former or is only able to assess the government agencies simply based on a general subjective impression (Duan, 2009). The dimensions of the evaluation are too broad and too abstract, usually following dimensions similar to those listed in the third-party evaluation mentioned above, so the evaluation gives no useful information about the causality of the level of satisfaction as a feedback to the agencies evaluated for learning (Wu and Gao, 2006). In essence, the evaluation exercise is not aimed at developing any sort of public participation in policy-making or management of the delivery of public services, so it remains far from the ideal practice of public deliberation.

Even though the above-mentioned performance evaluation by citizens primarily leads to enhancing the vertical accountability of government agencies, it does not necessarily exclude the use of other forms of evaluation from the building of horizontal accountability. There is a more sophisticated version of such evaluation by the masses as described above that is considered a sort of 'work style building' by the CCP. They may trigger the responsiveness of government agencies to the public and organizational learning in China. One of them is the DRABS. This type of review was first held in Shanghai in 1995 and it is now used as a nationwide evaluation activity organized by the local Supervision Bureau. The Supervision Bureau is an external agency directed by the Disciplinary Committee of the CCP, a CCP-watchdog for monitoring government agencies. Such an agency from a non-administrative branch in charge of the programme connotes that the review was originally aimed to oversee the operation of executive agencies and public utilities. Despite being titled a 'democratic review', DRABS by no means delegates powers to the general public to make binding decisions. The 'democracy' is confined to some forms of public participation that do not go beyond opinion consultation and citizen evaluation, as noted above. But it does not thus exclude possibilities for ordinary people to influence public policies.

According to the national guidelines for the implementation of the DRABS issued in July 2006, the aim of the review is to settle hot issues that are infringing on the general interest of the public; the criterion of whether the issues are settled well or not depends

on the levels of satisfaction reported by the public. The focuses of the review for government agencies consist of (1) discharge of duty in accordance with the law, (2) just enforcement of the law, (3) transparency of administration, (4) work efficiency, (5) service attitude and (6) integrity. These focuses overlap highly with the dimensions listed in the third-party evaluation in Wuhan, so it looks no clear difference between the DRABS and other performance evaluation exercises.

However, different from the exercises discussed above, the DRABS includes evaluation procedures that facilitate communication between the agencies reviewed and stakeholders who participate in the review in addition to a citizen satisfaction survey. In general, the review exercise contains four stages: (1) preparation stage: forming an ad hoc taskforce to conduct the review, and identifying agencies for review and review focuses; (2) rectification stage: self-review of agencies partly in response to the review and oral queries from external evaluators, and grievances of the public; (3) public survey; and (4) release of the results of the evaluation: ranking of agencies in the review, and the subsequent bestowal of rewards or imposition of sanctions (Hu and Wu, 2009).

The DRABS remains a little-researched subject among the various public performance mechanisms in China. This article tries to probe the concrete practice and effect of the DRABS in the most populous city in central China, Wuhan. The period of time during which the DRABS was held further spanned a year supplemented by routine monitoring programmes in collaboration with the mass media, and by taking advantage of the internet. A study of this case will therefore give some meaningful insight into the impact of the building of horizontal accountability under an authoritarian regime.

The following case study primarily relies on information and data from research papers on Wuhan's DRABS published in China, official documents collected during the author's fieldworks in Wuhan in 2011 and in-depth interviews with government officials and other non-official participants in the DRABS conducted during the fieldworks. It is supplemented by examination of some digital records of televised public inquiries held as a part of the DRABS and an official website of the DRABS, named 'Work Style On-Line' (WSOL), for the use of the public to lodge complaints and give feedback.

CASE STUDY: DEMOCRATIC REVIEW OF ADMINISTRATIVE AND BUSINESS STYLE IN WUHAN

Overview

The use of the DRABS in Wuhan began in 2003. Beginning in that year and annually thereafter, different domains of government agencies have been selected by the higher-level Hubei provincial government in accordance with the then policy focuses for inclusion in the review. For example, in 2010, 54 agencies were selected for review. They were

divided into three groups – (1) economic and social management, (2) administration and law enforcement and (3) public utilities – for separate evaluations. The focuses of the evaluation consisted of (1) development, (2) executive capacity, (3) transparency, (4) service and efficiency, (5) anti-corruption and (6) performance of rectification.

An ad hoc office called the 'Style Rectification Office' (SRO) was set up under the Supervision Bureau to handle the review exercise and other routine monitoring programmes. The review exercise formally starts in September and is completed by the end of the year, basically following the four stages mentioned above: (1) preparation stage (September), (2) rectification stage (October), (3) assessment exercise (November) and (4) release of results (December). In addition to conducting a citizen satisfaction survey, as noted above, the SRO also organizes a team of external evaluators called the 'Delegates for the Evaluation of Work Style' (DEWS), who were usually selected from the pools of university professors, delegates of the PC and the PCC, top business managers, retired senior cadres and journalists. The team is divided into small groups, each of which is composed of three members. Each group is assigned four to five agencies for in-depth evaluation. The DEWS are delegated authority to conduct investigations, supervision, evaluation and polling. This means that the DEWS are allowed to assess the performance outcomes of the government agencies assigned in a secret manner and by observation, and to collect public opinions about the agencies by approaching clients and community residents, and each group thereby completed a comprehensive review report for the agencies. To be sure, the DEWS are laymen, not official watchdogs or ombudsmen, so they are unable to look into the management inside the agencies (see Figure 1).

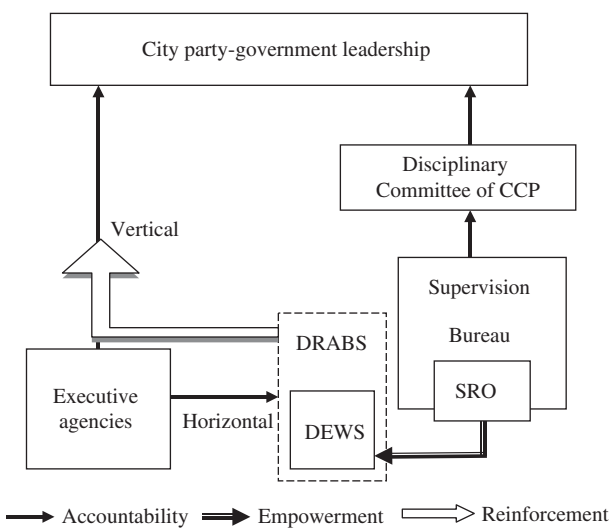

Figure 1: Accountability mechanism in the DRABS

The results of the review are presented in the form of numerical scores. A full score is 100 and a pass score 75. Those who get a score of 90 or above are ranked 'outstanding'. The review exercise accounts for 80 per cent of the total score, which is composed of assembly evaluation (30 per cent), on-line evaluation (20 per cent) and district evaluation (30 per cent). The assembly evaluation refers to the rating given in the evaluation assemblies organized in November. In the assemblies, the DEWS are offered a chance to question the top officials of agencies before the rating by the DEWS, top party-government leaders and other assigned supervisory correspondents. The on-line evaluation refers to the placing of a survey on the official website in October for the public to rate government agencies on-line. The district evaluation was a citizen satisfaction survey conducted in November in which 0.2 per cent of the population of each district in Wuhan was sampled for a questionnaire survey.

The remaining 20 per cent of the total score is accounted for by certain routine evaluations, which refer to a number of daily assessments carried out in accordance with certain criteria, including the response by agencies to public complaints, performance in the WSOL, the follow-up on progress in matters previously referred to for rectification, and the results from other daily satisfaction surveys of the public and enterprises.

No agency selected for appraisal by the DRABS has failed to pass the review so far. It seemed impossible for the city government to make its affiliated agencies squirm caused by a self-initiated programme.[3] An explanation given by a DEWS may account for it. She found that there were usually wide differences in the total scores given to the agencies reviewed. These were partly caused by the ratings of the DEWS that usually had a wide gap between good and poor performers. However, the top city-party-government leaders whose subordinate agencies were rated in the assembly evaluation would try their best to maximize their ratings so as to guarantee that all of the agencies could at least get a passing score.[4]

In addition to the above-mentioned problems concerning the poor design of the questionnaire survey shared by the case of Wuhan, there were other problematic practices that also cast doubt on the reliability and validity of the survey. First, before 2010 the SRO asked all respondents to sign the questionnaire, which failed to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of respondents, causing distorted responses (Xu, 2010). Second, the government agencies selected for the review would mobilize their staff to participate in the on-line rating as a way to inflate their score.[5]

All of the above denotes that the DRABS in Wuhan has failed to measure the real performance of government agencies. An official from the Supervision Bureau also noted that the result of the DRABS was not counted as part of the performance appraisal of party and government officials, so it made no impact on the career development of the agency heads, and thus did not impose sufficient pressure on them.[6] However, such an outcome did not mean that the review had no impact on the performance of the government agencies. The official also remarked that the top government leaders did not care about the scores of the agencies; what they cared

about was whether or not the process of conducting the review 'fuelled the work of the government' – i.e. the potential of the process to encourage the rectification of poor work practices.[7] In other words, the government agencies had to do something to improve their public services. The following will demonstrate the effect of the building of government responsiveness to the public driven by the DRABS.

Building responsiveness to the public

There are three functions established under the DRABS that show the building of a mechanism of direct public responsiveness. The first is a function of responsiveness to the DEWS; the second to the exposure in the media; and the third to individual clients. The first one is mainly carried out in the process of conducting the year-end review exercise; the second and the third are realized in routine monitoring programmes.

The responsiveness to the DEWS is realized in the writing of the review report and holding of the evaluation assembly. The review report is written based on the results of the probe by the DEWS into the performance of the government agencies. In addition to their own observation, the DEWS are, to a certain extent, writing the report in response to public opinion, as they collect opinions and complaints from the public before they draft their reports. At the same time, communication between the DEWS and government agencies is allowed before the agencies compile their self-reviews and the DEWS compile their reports. Agencies are informed in advance of what they should do to rectify their practices and improve their service, so that they can figure out measures for improvement to include in their self-reviews. Despite there being no record of failure to pass the review, officials now had to be open to the questioning and criticism by the DEWS in the assembly evaluation. Those who showed a poor attitude or gave unsatisfactory responses in the question session would be rebuked and such behaviour would be conducive to a poor rating.[8]

Such pressure was further strengthened through public exposure in the media. In order to follow up on the progress of rectification among the government agencies reviewed, the SRO organizes a live televised public inquiry every year. The top officials of certain government agencies are invited to the inquiry for questioning. The TV programme was further in the national spotlight in 2010. Forty-nine government agencies and public utilities were ordered to publish a list of promises about the provision of social services in January that year. In May, five government agencies were selected through on-line public polling to attend the televised public inquiry for an examination of how far they had fulfilled their promises. The five agencies were the Urban Management Bureau, Human Resources and Social Security Bureau, Housing Security and Housing Management Bureau, Public Security Bureau, and Transport Commission, all of which were involved in matters highly concerned with the day-to-day aspects of people's lives or had frequent contacts with the general public. The TV programme was organized as a show of exposure of the inability of the five agencies

to stick to certain social service promises and of certain instances of maladministration by the agencies. Footage of the poor service attitude of frontline officials and examples of undesirable performance by the five agencies was broadcast live, which was embarrassing to the heads of the agencies who attended the show, and it appeared that the heads were not well prepared enough to be able to limit the damage to their image immediately.[9]

Other channels have been established to facilitate communication between government agencies and individual clients. A regular phone-in radio programme has been set up to allow for more dialogue on public affairs. Senior officials of various government agencies are invited to the programme in turn to respond to the grievances or comments of callers on air and the officials also take the chance to carry out propaganda for their policies. In addition, communication is also conducted round the clock through the WSOL set up by the SRO in April 2011. The website provides a platform for giving feedback in terms of three categories: consultation, expression of opinion and complaints. The comments and opinions posted by netizens and the responses of the agencies-in-charge are all available on-line. The SRO also stipulates response-time benchmarks for these three kinds of feedback. According to the tracking by the author, government agencies have provided responses to all that the netizens posted, but around half of the official responses failed to meet the response-time benchmarks.[10]

All of the above measures do impose pressure on the executive agencies to address the needs of citizens and improve their transparency to enable scrutiny by the public, even though the CCP still keeps a rein on this kind of civic engagement so as to avoid any attack on the bureaucracy getting out-of-control. These acts are usually disdained as only a device for top local CCP leaders to utilize in order to advance their own careers in a top-down party-state structure. But the subordinate-level government officials do not put on an act for a show directed by their political bosses. Even though the official of the Supervision Bureau interviewed above did not consider that the DRABS had well functioned, he revealed the fact that the subordinate-level officials were confronted with real pressure. They even grumbled to him, 'Don't do the review exercise anymore. It just gets me into trouble for advancing your own performance [i.e. the Supervision Bureau's performance].'[11]

The use of the DRABS has brought about improvements in government performance with regard to the efficiency and quality of the delivery of services in Wuhan. Convenience in public service is being enhanced in the city. More one-stop services are offered. Service hours have been extended, sometimes to include Saturday.[12] The DEWS also offered opinions to hasten administrative re-engineering, such as information-sharing between government departments.[13] The phone-in radio programme and the WSOL offer a convenient and open public access to government agencies, which at least and enhances the comprehensibility of the administrative system and occasionally addresses some community issues promptly, such as garbage disposal, car parking and damage of community facilities. The televised public inquiry serves as a 'barking dog' to stimulate responsiveness.

All of the above give wide opportunities to the general public to voice their feedback and opinions on public governance. That is the foundation for public deliberation. In a practical sense, the DRABS can help facilitate the improvement and rectification of certain technical, maladministration and red-tape problems of the government agencies. However, if the problem is at a policy-making level or to do with a deep-seated institutional flaw, it is beyond the capacity of these executive agencies to address. By the same token, the DRABS is unable to play a role in driving reform of such an underlying issue, either. For instance, the Water Supply Group is a public utility in Wuhan in charge of handling a waste-water treatment system that now needs thorough redevelopment in order to prevent flooding during rainy seasons with the heaviest rainfall. However, the policy-level Development and Reform Commission that is in charge of the allocation of resources has failed to provide any funding for it. The Group thus finds itself in the position of being unable to do anything to address the problem and can only submit to being the scapegoat for it.[14]

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

According to the findings of the above case study, the evaluation of the performance of government agencies in an authoritarian regime does not necessarily work at the expense of improvements in performance. The improvements are possible when they are associated with the building of public as well as horizontal accountability. The building of such an accountability mechanism, which is usually associated with electoral democracies, in a non-democratic system can be accounted for based on two causes in China. First, the understanding of the tradition of the mass line advocated in the era of Mao Zedong before the 1980s helps to make sense of the CCP's attempts in the post-Mao era. Second, the building of horizontal accountability may alternatively serve as a managerial rather than a democratic function, which suits the needs of top leaders. The first cause is unique to China; the second may be possibly shared by democratic or non-democratic countries.

Combating bureaucratism through the use of populist mass mobilization campaigns was a hallmark of political participation in the era of Mao Zedong (Townsend, 1977), but while such directed mobilization had already faded out during the last decades of the twentieth century, many of the current reform practices of the CCP still share the spirit and rhetoric of the anti-bureaucratic movements effected through mass involvement in the radical era (Perry, 2011). However, the post-Mao version of civic engagement is no longer of 'mobilized participation' but of 'managed participation' (Cai, 2004). Besides the pulling of strings by the party, the 'management' also implies the utilization of some new instruments, like social surveys, the mass media and the internet. Although the design and method of such social surveys need substantial improvement to build up their reliability and validity, the use of such kind of mechanism to encourage social feedback goes beyond the conflict approach adopted

previously under the class struggle theory of Maoism. Despite being not very new for advanced countries, the instruments do help build up a new bridge between citizens and government agencies for those countries under political liberalization, like China.

At the same time, the evaluation exercise in the DRABS in Wuhan shares the usual practice of 'naming and shaming' of management performance in western countries when the Chinese counterparts apply exposure in the media as a way to embarrass government officials into a response. This exposure also, to some extent, helps build up transparency in government. On the other hand, despite the lack of linkage between the appraisal of the performance of officials and the review exercise, it has encouraged organizational learning through the social feedback, especially from the communication with the DEWS. It echoes the advocacy of recent literature that 'learning and continuous improvement' is a more desirable purpose for performance management rather than 'reward and sanction' (Aucoin and Heintzman, 2000; van Dooren *et al.*, 2010).

However, the new version remains old wine in a new bottle at base. It re-applies the 'sandwiching' approach used under the anti-bureaucracy movements in the Mao Zedong era to place officials in between pressure from higher levels and criticism from below (Whyte, 1980). However, such a 'sandwiching' approach is not unique to China but also works as a managerial function in democracies. To serve as a way to mitigate the principal–agent problem, democracies also share such practice, where the mechanism of horizontal accountability serves as a 'proxy' for democratic principals (elected political leaders) to indirectly control the executive agencies by directly engaging various kinds of social groups in the oversight institution. For instance, sponsored by ministries, boards of stakeholders, boards of commissioners and independent evaluation committee are formed to monitor various government executive agencies in the Netherlands. These institutions are equipped with weak sanctioning powers, like negative publicity by publishing evaluation reports, to which executives of the agencies are still highly alert (Schillemans, 2011). In Mexico, in order to counter-attack local grain oligopolies supported by local states, the federal government set up regional councils involving grass-root representatives to closely monitor food distribution companies (Fox, 2004). The authoritarian version of sandwiching strategy in China does not vary too far from the democratic ones in this regard. The difference lies in there being 'unelected principals' in place of 'democratic principals'. It also accounts for why the non-elected top local leaders engage citizens in the oversight function.

Without an electoral democracy, of course, the pressure to push public responsiveness is not high enough in China. The degree to which responsiveness has been enhanced by the DRABS in Wuhan should not be overplayed, let alone be seen as a substitute for a direct election. The approximately 50 per cent adherence to the response-time benchmarks in the WSOL is a case in point. The enhanced responsiveness seems to be confined to lower-level executive agencies, which result fails to respond to the demand for substantial institutional reforms or policy changes. This deficiency reveals the fact that the building of the horizontal line of accountability is rather a tactic of local party leaders at the top to ensure the vertical accountability of

subordinate officials (see Figure 1). It is impossible for the top leaders to shoot themselves in the foot. However, it is possible that such a mechanism would further soften the authoritarianism, like the top-down political liberalization in Taiwan in the 1970s–1980s (Winckler, 1984), which was conducive to peaceful transition to democracy of the mainland's neighbouring island in the 1990s.

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NOTES

1 *Provisional Regulations of Performance Management in Wuhan* [issued on 10 October 2006]; *Guideline for Executing Third-party Evaluation under Performance Management* [issued on 19 June 2006].
2 About five different ways of administering questionnaires are used: (1) issuance of questionnaires to the people who attend government-organized performance evaluation meetings; (2) issuance to the public in certain specific places; (3) issuance to some specific groups of people; (4) conduct of surveys at randomly selected places; and (5) attachment of questionnaires to newspapers that are delivered to readers. See Xie (2008: 137–9).
3 Interview with an official of the Supervision Bureau in Wuhan (31 August 2011).
4 According to an interview with one of DEWS (31 August 2011), the corps of such party-government leaders numbered up to 100 persons, whereas the group of DEWS numbered no more than 40.
5 Interview with a DEW (31 August 2011).
6 As Note 3.
7 Ibid.
8 As Note 5.
9 See the TV programme at: http://www.whbc.com.cn/rdzt/2010yearzt/zt_hflx2010/
10 See the WSOL at: http://hflx.whjjjc.org.cn/application/main/xzqh.jsp
11 As Note 3.
12 In the government report to the People's Congress in Wuhan addressed on 13 February 2011, the city government promised to extend the office hours of 14 government service counters. See http://www.wh.gov.cn/frontpage/pubinfo/PubinfoDetail.action?id=1201102211242340001
13 As Note 5. The DEW mentioned a case that the Environmental Protection Bureau (EPB) in Wuhan held data of water quality that was valuable to the Water Supply Bureau (WSB); the EPB was not willing to share the data with the WSB. Under the moderating of the DEWS, a mechanism was set up to share the data with the WSB.
14 Ibid.

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