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Recent developments and future directions of administrative service reform in China

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Abstract

This chapter reviews the recent reforms and developments of administrative service delivery in Mainland China, and specifically focuses on the reforms to streamline administrative services by delegating power, strengthening regulation and improving services (*Fangguanfu* reforms, or the FGF reforms). The chapter analyses the key initiatives in decentralisation, regulatory innovations and public service delivery reforms, and discusses the main challenges in implementing the FGF reforms. The FGF reforms may be considered a hybrid of new public management (NPM) and post-NPM reforms with Chinese characteristics: top-level design and local pilots, together with citizen engagement and digitalisation, play key roles in the reform. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications of the recent FGF reforms for theoretical developments and comparative studies of administrative reforms.

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Introduction

The system of delivering public services in China, specifically the administrative services affecting individuals and businesses including, the examination and approval procedures for day-to-day business, have been substantially transformed since the instalment of the Xi Jinping administration in 2012; Premier Li Keqiang and his team at the General Office of the State Council have been leading the reforms. The reforms, called ‘the reforms to streamline administration, delegate power, strengthen regulation, and improve services’ (*Fangguanfu* reforms, or the FGF reforms), are ambitious and comprehensive, and are already achieving remarkable improvements in state–citizen interaction and the regulatory environment of doing business.

As one of the core missions of the Xi Jinping administration, the FGF reforms were kicked off in 2015 by the central government in China, with the purpose of transforming government functions, improving the business environment and boosting citizen satisfaction and government legitimacy. The FGF reforms require the central and provincial governments to delegate power and authority to lower-level governments at the grassroots levels (e.g. town/township/subdistrict and community/village), which are expected to directly deliver customised administrative services to citizens and businesses. The FGF reforms urge government agencies to strengthen and transform business regulations, particularly market entry and regulatory compliance. The FGF reforms aim to innovate and improve public services: digital technologies are leveraged both to improve service efficiency and to respond better to citizens’ and businesses’ needs and expectations.

Governments deliver a very wide range of public services include infrastructure, education, healthcare, environmental protection, public housing, social security, cultural and sports facilities and public transport (Osborne 2020). In 2017, China’s central government released the 13th Five-Year Plan for essential public services for the first time, which listed eight categories of public services that local governments should deliver, including education, jobs and entrepreneurship, social insurance, health care, social services for the elderly, housing, culture and sports, and services for the disabled. Central and local governments share their financing responsibilities according to provincial fiscal capacity. For instance, Beijing and other affluent municipalities

and provinces shoulder 90 per cent of their total spending, while inland provinces such as Xinjiang are required only to cover 20 per cent. The central government announced national standards for these essential public services in 2021 specifying the criteria and procedures for their delivery. The 14th Five-Year Plan for public services (2021–2025), drafted by the National Development and Reform Commission, was approved by the State Council and promulgated in 2022: it significantly expanded the coverage of public services. Apart from the essential public services covered by the 13th Five-Year Plan (2016–2021), non-essential public services and community services such as childcare, preschool education and housekeeping are also highlighted in the updated plan.

This chapter does not explore public services such as education, health, environment and transport. Instead, it focuses on administrative services that are central to the relationship between government and citizens and businesses and critical to the delivery of many of the broader public services. Administrative services include government information disclosure, administrative review and approval; birth registration, driving licenses, car registration and other accreditations citizens need; and business registration, tax reporting and building approvals, etc. which businesses need. Citizens and businesses who are required to provide information or to seek permission to do things need first to be informed about the procedures involved; public service agencies must then check such provided information and determine if the citizens/businesses are eligible to be registered or licensed. For instance, citizens have to register with government official portals (or other offline and online channels) and submit forms and supporting documents; government employees then review the forms and applications and inform the citizens whether their applications have been approved. Registration typically affects how other public services are provided, including health care, social security, education, transport and public housing. In other words, administrative services are not only a subset of overall public services, but also impact a wide range of public services. For these reasons, they are a major focus for reform.

China is not alone in this wave of administrative reform, and it is not unique in terms of its reform agenda and approaches. For instance, there are both new public management (NPM) and post-NPM aspects to the FGF reforms, and such a hybridity together with Chinese characteristics merits academic attention. The FGF reforms are relevant to deepening understanding of government reforms in China, and they provoke comparison with similar practices in other contexts.

They also represent a case study of how reforms, whatever their derivation, must be adapted to fit in with a country's real political framework (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2017; Peters 2018). Reforms are not existentially neutral, but rather are shaped, adopted, amended and necessarily evolutionary within a specific indigenous political and administrative set of cultures. Accordingly, the values and politics of the Chinese party-state system inform adoption and implementation of the reforms in China.

This chapter reviews the recent reforms and developments of public service delivery in Mainland China, and specifically focuses on the FGF reforms. Following a brief discussion of concepts and theories, the key initiatives of decentralisation, regulatory innovations and public service delivery reforms are analysed, and the main challenges during implementation of the reforms are discussed. The chapter mainly uses the cases of Beijing, Zhejiang and Guizhou to show how the FGF reforms work, and also uses secondary archives and interviewing data to support the assessment. In the concluding section, the broader challenges of the recent reforms are discussed, together with the implications for theoretical developments and comparative studies.

Concepts and theories

Administrative reforms: NPM and post-NPM influences

Administrative reforms in recent decades are often examined through the perspectives of NPM and post-NPM developments in public administration. This chapter draws on these two international trends to review China's FGF reforms. The NPM reforms and the government reinvention movement since the late 1980s have been influential first in the Anglo-Saxon countries and then in the rest of the world (Christensen and Lægreid 2007b). Traditional public administration is characterised by procedure-based bureaucracy and business processes inert to changes in the external environment or citizens' demands. NPM involved government learning from the private sector and utilising customer-centric, performance-driven and result-oriented approaches to improve government performance (Hood 1991). Market competition, performance measurement and customer orientation, among other techniques, were introduced into government, and government practices increasingly mimicked those of private businesses. While NPM-oriented reforms helped mitigate some of the problems of traditional bureaucracy (Dan and Pollitt 2015), they also introduced their

own problems (Lapiente and Van de Walle 2020). For instance, as public services were increasingly outsourced to the private sector, government capability was hollowed out; the focus on each agency and program to improve performance also led to government working in silos, weakening horizontal coordination. Also, privatisation of public services, particularly in the field of infrastructure and public utility, jeopardised public service values, increasing the risk of social inequality (Bertelli et al. 2020).

Post-NPM or new public governance emerged in the 2000s to address the problems of NPM reforms, promoting values and approaches substantially different in many respects from that of NPM (Reiter and Klenk 2018). To some extent, post-NPM has involved a retreat to traditional bureaucracy, while retaining some elements of NPM. For instance, post-NPM reforms usually involve whole-of-government approaches, highlighting the imperative that government agencies should work together in making things happen (Christensen and Lægreid 2007a). Also, citizens are not simply considered as ‘customers’ or ‘clients’ of government services, but instead are recognised as having rights and obligations and are to be more fully engaged, including through co-design of public policies, co-production of public services and co-creation of public value (Alford and O’Flynn 2012).

NPM and post-NPM are not completely distinct paradigms, however: instead, around the world, they are often combined or hybridised in administrative reforms. The recent government reforms in China are an example of a hybrid of NPM and post-NPM approaches, and there are also many other examples of this hybridity (Christensen and Fan 2016; Tian and Christensen 2019). For instance, super-ministry reforms and small leading groups have been promoted in China’s recent government reforms to help strengthen inter-agency coordination, but most decision-making, policy implementation, and scrutiny are still fragmented across agencies and different levels of government. Also, market-oriented reforms in many of China’s public service areas have been maintained, but the control and coordination of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the sole ruling party of China, has not been weakened but rather strengthened over the past decade.

State–citizen interaction and administrative burden

Public administration may be separated into two components, and administrative reforms may be aimed at either or both of them. One concerns the internal operations and management of government, including strategic management, organisational structure and processes,

personnel management, budgeting and technologies. The other concerns government's external relations, including the interactions between government and citizens and other stakeholders—for example, businesses (both as vendors and customers) and non-government organisations—to deliver public services and to regulate behaviour in the public interest. The ultimate goal of internal operations and management is to facilitate meeting government's external responsibilities, and these may in turn spur further internal reforms and changes. Administrative reforms are mainly aimed at streamlining internal structures and processes, and thereby at rebalancing the interactions between the state and citizens/businesses.

This chapter considers the FGF reforms through the perspective of state–citizen interactions (Jakobsen et al. 2016), and how the various reform measures are being used to facilitate simpler interactions between government and citizens/businesses. Government agencies are set up to perform separate functions, but the separation of many functions and agencies often frustrates citizens and businesses who want to interact with government. Also, particularly in China, there is currently serious risk of street-level bureaucrats misusing or abusing administrative discretion in their daily interactions with citizens and/or businesses, making government unresponsive to public demands.

One of the purposes of the FGF reforms is to reduce administrative burden. Administrative burden is the costs shouldered by citizens and businesses in their interactions with government, which includes learning cost, compliance cost and psychological cost (Moynihan et al. 2015; Herd and Moynihan 2018). The learning cost refers to the cost to citizens from having to learn about administrative eligibilities, procedures and processes; these usually require citizens to have sufficient cognitive capacity, social capital and administrative resources. The compliance cost refers to the costs citizens have to shoulder in order to comply with government policies, including various fees and direct and indirect expenses during their interactions. For instance, citizens may have to apply for leave and pay for commuting between government agencies and their localities, in addition to meeting compulsory processing fees. The psychological cost is the psychological discomfort involved in the state–citizen interactions, including anxiety, nervousness, frustration and depression.

Organisational restructuring and business process reengineering can help streamline state–citizen interactions and reduce the administrative burden. For instance, a whole-of-government approach can help citizens and businesses to interact with government more easily so they do not have

to approach each agency separately and face the higher costs of doing so. Also, the introduction of digital technologies and the digital transformation of government processes can facilitate state–citizen interactions, and substantially reduce the administrative burden. Particularly in the case of FGF reforms, digital technologies play an indispensable role in reducing administrative burden.

The framework behind the FGF reforms’ design and implementation

Four strategies are central to the success of the reforms. First, the administrative service reform is the landmark agenda of the new Xi Jinping administration, and top-level design and policy steering are the driving forces of the FGF reforms. Second, local governments are encouraged to implement policy pilots, which are scrutinised leading to an agreed model that is then replicated, and generalised nationally. Third, the digitalisation of administrative service delivery processes facilitates the FGF reforms, which are essential to the improvement of public service quality. Last but not least, citizens and businesses are central to the FGF reforms, and their feedback through ratings, complaints and suggestions help diagnose and improve public services.

The State Council and its General Office, particularly the Office of Government Function Transformation, is playing the lead role in the top-level design of the FGF reforms. While previous administrations focused on bottom-up local experimentation and pilots (Chen and Göbel 2016), the Xi administration highlights the paramount role of top-level design (*Dingceng Sheji*) (Ahlers 2018). For very large countries with multilevel governance regimes like China, it is important to balance central mandates and local discretion (Ang 2017). The increasing role of top-level design has meant that the state governance system has become more unified and arguably more stabilised and mature, with local governments urged to follow central mandates in policy implementation (Ma 2022). The State Council has paid attention to the World Bank’s ‘doing business’ ranking (renamed and recalibrated into the bank’s business-enabled environment survey in 2021), and the metrics are used as benchmarks to monitor and incentivise local governments to improve public service delivery and market regulation. Under the leadership of Premier Li Keqiang, the State Council has strengthened inter-ministerial coordination to facilitate data sharing and business interoperation across levels, regions and departments.

The second strategy involves local governments being mobilised by the central government to implement the FGF reforms with local experimentation, and the nationwide diffusion of the FGF reforms then being accelerated through routinised mechanisms. Since 2013, the State Council designated a group of Pilot Free Trade Zones ('Pilot FTZs') across China, which have been asked to explore frontier innovations for the FGF reforms. The policy pilots and experiments by FTZs are then carefully assessed before a nationwide policy is decided upon for replication and generalisation, and local governments are required to adopt these innovations. Different from previous bottom-up local experimentation, policy diffusion is now institutionally mandated and the extent to which agreed policies are replicated at the local level is scrutinised by the central government.

The third strategy involves embracing digital technologies, particularly big data analytics, artificial intelligence and other emerging disruptive technologies; this has been increasingly incorporated into the FGF reforms. China is leading the new wave of the digital economy, and governments are keen on introducing cutting-edge technologies in public service delivery and market regulation (Ma et al. 2021). For instance, previously businesses had to search and apply for preferential policies and subsidies for which they might be qualified, which involved costs in time, administrative capital and financial burden. Thanks to the use of big data analytics and recommendation algorithms, businesses' demographic and operating data across various departments are linked and automatically analysed against particular policy requirements to determine eligibility precisely and in a timely and fully informed manner.

Lastly, the FGF reforms have a continuous improvement focus, aimed to reduce administrative burdens in state–citizen interaction: the views and demands of citizens and businesses are central to the reform agenda (Liao 2020). Feedback from clients is used in local government performance ratings and rankings, and local officials are incentivised to meet the demands of citizens and businesses. For instance, Beijing initiated a reform called 'swift response to public complaints', which is dedicated to responding to and processing citizen complaints documented through the municipal hotline 12345 and other online channels (Wei et al. 2022). Public complaints are processed without delay, and governments stay responsive to the calls of the people. In comparison to prior rounds of administrative reforms, citizen feedback has played a more important role in eliciting policy innovations and accelerating reforms.

The FGF reforms are jointly driven by top-level design and steering, local policy experimentation and nationwide policy diffusion, digital transformation of administrative business processes, and citizen engagement and feedback. Top-down policy mandates help consolidate nationwide policies, while promising policy innovations emerge from bottom-up but centrally controlled policy experimentation. Technologies play an increasingly salient role in meeting service clients' demands, and citizens and businesses engage in the processes of service delivery to help improve service quality. Taken together, these components have helped to strengthen the FGF reforms and have also contributed in the past decade to rejuvenating the party-state regime.

The FGF reforms in China

The FGF reforms include three components: delegation, regulation and public service delivery (see Figure 16.1). The core of the FGF reforms is to rebalance and reshape the relationships between governments, businesses and citizens. The first component of the FGF reforms is to delegate power and authority to lower-level governments, which is part of an ongoing process of decentralisation and empowerment. The second component is to lower the operational cost of doing business with government through deregulation and regulatory innovations. The last component is to improve administrative services through digital technologies and business process reengineering. This chapter will review the key initiatives of the three components and use the case of the 'once-only' reform to illustrate how they work.

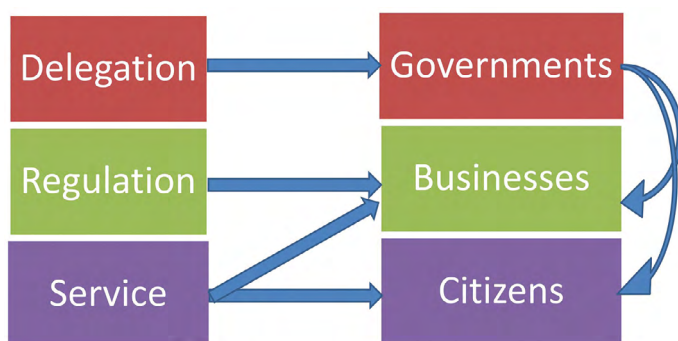


Figure 16.1: Components of FGF reforms.

Source: Author's summary.

Key initiatives (1): Delegation

The first component of the FGF reforms is to streamline administration and delegate power, with the aim of reshaping central–local relations and government–market relations. The government of China is a unitary system where cadres at lower levels of government are appointed by superior party authorities. Policy decision-making follows the chain of command, often making it difficult for lower-level governments to respond to citizen and business demands in a timely and effective manner. The bureaucracy is often characterised by the concept of ‘fragmented authoritarianism’ (Lieberthal and Lampton 1992; Mertha 2009), which means the government is authoritarian but fragmented across administrative silos created by government agencies and across different levels of government. The FGF reforms require the central ministries and commissions to delegate administrative authority to local governments, ensuring grassroots quasi-government organisations have the power to make decisions and implement the policies set by their superior authorities. Also, the FGF reforms set a framework to make public services increasingly accessible at the neighbourhood level. For instance, ‘15-minutes community service circles’ are aimed to ensure citizens and businesses have easy access to more frequently used government services.

The FGF reforms not only transform relations between central and local governments, but also transform government–market relations and government–citizen relations. The dominant central planning economy before the late 1970s involved the government controlling everything with no space for the market and civil society; the subsequent opening-up reforms have transformed government functions, allowing room for markets and citizens to develop their own businesses and activities. The past decades have witnessed some swinging back and forth of government functions, but generally government has increasingly transferred former functions to the market and society. Meanwhile, ‘social accountability’ (Ma 2012) has been strengthened, and government is under increasing scrutiny by the public, the media and other stakeholders. Developments under the Xi administration since 2012, however, have been more mixed, involving a combination of increased party control with continued reform of service delivery.

In the case of the FGF reforms, government administrative powers and authorities are now listed and published at all levels to firmly specify the scope of government functions and to help the market and society (businesses and citizens) to hold government accountable. Administrative review and approval have often involved rent-seeking and corruption, and

the FGF reforms are intended to ensure government offers the helping hand instead of the grabbing hand. The reform of administrative powers, and how relevant applications are made and approved, has significantly reduced the arbitrary power of government and the capacity for officials to exploit their positions, and empowered citizens to hold government more accountable. For instance, previously administrative decision-making was sprawled across many agencies, but the new bureau of administrative review and approval consolidates all these under one agency, making it more coherent and responsive to citizens' and businesses' demands. The rubber stamp controls of different government agencies have been sealed up, and only the bureau of administrative review and approval has the authority to approve the vast majority of administrative applications from citizens and businesses. Given the lack of nationwide inter-ministerial coordination and implementation standards, however, the scope of centralised administrative review and approval depends on the reform agenda of local governments.

Key initiatives (2): Deregulation and regulatory innovations

The second component of the FGF reforms is to reduce the administrative burden on business through various measures including deregulation and re-regulation. First, the government implemented tax cuts and administrative fee reductions to lower enterprises' operational costs and to improve their competitiveness. Previously, government agencies often set fees arbitrarily, which not only provided opportunities for corruption but also increased the burden on business. The FGF reforms eradicated lots of illegal fees and assisted businesses with tax cuts, allowing businesses to operate in friendlier circumstances. Second, government lowered market entry costs so that new enterprises and self-employed businesses could start up more easily. Previously, businesses had to apply for both a business license and various industry-specific permits simultaneously (e.g. a food production permit for the food and beverage industry), before they could kick off their businesses, which delayed their opening and increased their cost tremendously. The FGF reforms separated the initial permits from the business license, allowing businesses to register and begin operating as separate stages. The FGF reforms also promoted the all-in-one identification approach, which integrates the business license, certificates of organisation codes (e.g. industry statistical codes) and taxation registration, among others, into one license number, the ID of each business, making it easier for cross-agency data sharing and business interoperation.

Third, the FGF reforms focus on improving the environment for doing business and government–business relations. Government agencies previously focused mainly on reviewing and approving who should be allowed to enter the market (e.g. business registration), while the operational and post-operational oversight (e.g. tax reporting, market regulations) has been ignored or overlooked. The criteria for market entry were not well designed or applied consistently, and businesses were not regulated appropriately once they entered the market. In other words, government agencies were adept at selling ‘tickets’ to enter the market, while their regulatory capacities in maintaining the rules of the market were weak.

Government–business relations were complicated and the rules applied subjectively: the FGF reforms are also aimed to make government interact with business in a close and clean way. Closeness means government should be responsive to business demands, and civil servants should sympathise with and pay attention to businesses. Cleanness means government must be honest and corruption-free, and businesses must not offer bribes for policy favouritism. The FGF reforms emphasise regulatory innovations helping rebalance relations between government and business. Previously, businesses were often selected arbitrarily, and regulatory enforcement involved rent-seeking and corruption. For instance, enterprises with close connections to government agencies and officials were sheltered from regulations. An oversight model of random inspection and public reporting has been introduced in the FGF reforms, where enterprises are randomly sampled, regulatory officials are randomly appointed, and the regulatory reports are publicly circulated. Also, a credit-based regulation system is being implemented in the FGF reforms, where credits for meeting regulatory requirements are aggregated through various sources and are used as a risk management approach to sampling who should be inspected. These and other measures help clean the government–business relations and improve the quality of regulatory practices.

Key initiatives (3): Public service delivery

The third and last component of the FGF reforms is to improve and innovate public service delivery through measures such as business process simplification, the reduction of red tape and redundant procedures, digitalisation and integration. Thanks to the increasing penetration and use of digital technologies such as smart phones, mobile internet, big data analytics and artificial intelligence, public services are being increasingly

digitalised, simplified and integrated, and the experiences of citizens and businesses have been significantly improved (Ma et al. 2021; Zheng and Ma 2021).

The Internet Plus Government Services initiative, part of China's 'Internet +' strategy (Jing and Li 2018), is core to the FGF reforms. Without the engagement of various digital technologies, the intended purposes of the FGF reforms would not be possible. The administrative review and approval system reforms in the 1990s and 2000s had mixed success, partly due to the lack of the technological supports that are common nowadays. For instance, previously people had to have their identity verified and had to visit government agencies or administrative service centres in person. The use of facial recognition technology, automatic machines and robots helps simplify this process, and people no longer have to visit government agencies in person to prove their identity. The integration of administrative services, particularly the nationwide and cross-provincial one-stop service platform, has significantly reduced the administrative burden of rural migrant workers in particular: previously they had to move between hometown and workplace provinces for administrative affairs simply to renew their ID.

Since early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the digitalisation of public services, and the 'health code' is a typical case (Shi et al. 2021). The health code is an app co-developed by government agencies and internet titans, which can digitally trace close contacts and infection chains. While many close contact tracing applications developed in other countries have failed, the health code has worked well in China's fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.

Case study: The once-only reform

The 'visit once' or 'once-only' reform is a typical example of the FGF reforms. It was first piloted in Zhejiang province and then implemented across China (Huang and Yu 2019; Gao and Tan 2020). Previously citizens and businesses had to visit government agencies or administrative service centres several times to have a typical business or personal matter approved. For instance, people may first come to find out about the procedures and processes and collect the forms to be completed, and then come back to submit the required forms. Often the completed forms might not be fully in line with government requirements, and people had to come back again. If the matter concerned multiple government agencies in different locations, people would have to be psychologically prepared for the long struggle of

going back and forth. In some cases, civil servants might collude with agents to set barriers to administrative review and approval, forcing people to pay them for approval—a form of corruption (Zhang and Rosenbloom 2018; Zhang et al. 2021).

The once-only reform aims to cut citizens' and businesses' legwork in their interactions with government through government restructuring and business process reengineering. Previously, people had to visit multiple doors of government agencies or various windows of administrative service centres, so the first step has been to consolidate these into one-stop service centres installed with comprehensive portals catering to a wide range of inquiries and requests. No matter the kind of request, people can visit any portal, and their requests can be handled. The administrative burden of verifying people's identity, collecting information, processing forms, etc. are transferred from citizens and businesses to the government. To limit the resulting administrative burden on government and to make the reform possible, government has leveraged digital technologies to simplify the processes of administrative approval.

The once-only reform redefined what is one deal and what is one time. For instance, the birth of a baby involves a range of administrative matters for a family, which has to deal with various agencies at different administrative levels and in different jurisdictions: to register with a hospital, to be vaccinated, to register the household, to apply for maternity insurance for the mother and medical insurance for the baby etc. Previously people had to visit each of the different agencies concerned, often multiple times, and the whole administrative burden was very high. For first-time parents who are struggling with a whole new life with a crying baby, the frictions involved in dealing with various agencies might even frustrate them to the point of regretting the decision to have a baby, notwithstanding how important this is both to the family and to a country with lingering low fertility.

For each task, people can now visit government one time. The whole administrative process after having a baby now involves just one administrative deal, and the FGF reform aimed to ensure that people visit government services a maximum of one time. That is what the once-only reform has to achieve, and it is meeting the target through the use of multipurpose service stations and the sharing of identity/certification data across levels, regions and agencies. For instance, the use of facial recognition enables people's identities to be verified online, and their personal and business data authorised and safely shared among pertinent agencies for

verification. Similarly, for the start up of a barber shop or convenience store, the once-only reform also treats that process as one deal, so people should only need to visit government a maximum of one time. Local governments are developing administrative service packages for industries such as restaurants, and the administrative burden for entrepreneurs to start new businesses is being substantially reduced.

Discussion

Key challenges of service delivery

The FGF reforms are meeting their purposes of improving public services and the business environment, but they also face huge challenges in their current and future endeavours. First, the FGF reforms are primarily driven by digital technologies, but the digital divide in China makes social inequity a big concern. The internet penetration rate in China is 71.6 percent (in 2021), though 99.6 per cent of the population use smart phones. The share of urban residents using internet is 78.3 per cent, but it is only 59.2 per cent for rural residents. The barriers for the elderly and disabled people to use the internet for administrative services is still a big challenge, despite government attempts to address this persistent problem.

Second, the bureau of administrative review and approval is helping to consolidate the bureaucracy and streamline state–citizen interactions, but coordination between approvals and ongoing regulation is problematic. Approval and regulation were previously controlled by each functional agency, but they are now separated into the bureau of administrative review and approval and the functional agency. The data sharing and functional coordination is challenging, because agencies have to be held accountable for practices that are now shared across agencies. Also, only the bureau of administrative review and approval has the authority to approve administrative requests, and its monopoly over such administrative authority might breed its own corruption without appropriate checks and balances.

Third, the government–business relations in digital government are complicated, and the engagement of internet titans makes the FGF reforms themselves susceptible to exploitation, corruption and cybersecurity concerns. The automation and robotisation of administrative approval on the one hand has improved people's service experience, but on the other

hand escalates the risks of sensitive data leakage. The missing links across agencies, levels and regions might partly be attributable to the internet titans behind the scenes, and competition between them in the market of digital government may be denying the possibility of more advanced and integrated applications.

Fourth, it is imperative to consider the sustainability of the FGF reforms. The administrative burden might have shifted from the side of citizens and businesses to the side of government, but civil servants may be reluctant to deepen the FGF reforms if their burden cannot be contained. Particularly for agencies at the grassroots level, their administrative burden has not so far been reduced despite the delegation of authority from the top. The possible misdirection of the FGF reforms is also relevant, because many local governments pay attention solely to the speed, timeliness or efficiency of administrative approval (e.g. automatic approval in seconds) rather than the substance of the claim. Few consider seriously the outcomes of the FGF reforms beyond immediate efficiency.

The performance of the FGF reforms is currently welcomed by the public, but the new government service evaluation system (*haochaping*) has not yet met government expectations. The system is intended to track and use service feedback for service improvement, and businesses and the public can rate service quality easily. The evaluations are timely, traceable and precise, and government can leverage big data analytics to diagnose performance gaps and identify paths to performance improvement, but citizens and businesses have so far been reluctant or not accustomed to such evaluations, and the quality of performance data is poor (Wang and Ma 2022). Also, the use of big data analytics, artificial intelligence, blockchain and other disruptive technologies in the FGF reforms may involve cybersecurity risks such as privacy leakage and digital inequity (Henman 2020), and it is important to develop digitally inclusive and responsive services and regulations.

Administrative reforms in China: Past, present and future

To what extent are the FGF reforms different from past waves of administrative reforms in China? The FGF reforms are a people-centric, technology-driven movement to transform the government itself and the approaches it uses to get things done. The FGF reforms are not only about administrative reforms, but also involve governance transformation (Jing 2021). The Xi administration is highlighting the imperative to

modernise the state governance system and improve state governance capacity, and the FGF reforms are an important component of its modernisation agenda. Prior reforms were often called ‘crossing the river by touching the stones’, which means they involved processes of ‘muddling-through’. The current reform agenda has a much firmer top-level design, meaning the reforms have first been designed by the top decision-makers and then implemented at the local level. The FGF reforms adopt a whole-of-government approach in reform design and implementation and use the leverage of digital technologies to facilitate its processes. In comparison to prior reform waves, the FGF reforms are more comprehensive, in-depth and potentially effective.

Are the FGF reforms a hybrid of NPM and post-NPM agendas? The analyses of this chapter show that the FGF reforms do involve a hybrid of past and emerging reform waves including NPM and post-NPM reform or new public governance. The businesses and citizens are supported by government through more efficient and effective approaches and they utilise the private market, which is exactly what the NPM movement advocates. The government is also organised as a whole to coordinate across agencies, levels and jurisdictions, which is a landmark of the post-NPM approach. Other examples of the FGF reforms demonstrate either NPM or post-NPM elements, making it a hybridised form, similar to prior waves of administrative reforms in China (Christensen and Fan 2016; Tian and Christensen 2019). Given the digital transformation of government due to the ubiquitous and penetrative utilisation of digital technologies, the FGF reforms are also embracing digital-era governance (Dunleavy et al. 2006) or even an open governance paradigm (Meijer et al. 2019).

Are the FGF reforms diverging from administrative reforms in other countries in recent decades? Similar to its prior reform endeavours, China is learning from the West in designing the FGF reforms, but they also apply indigenous experiments and more elaborate technological innovations, as well as adapting the reforms to fit Chinese characteristics. The FGF reforms might not represent a ‘China model’, but they can still be examined in a comparative perspective and it is relevant to explore their Chinese characteristics and possible global implications. For instance, it might be helpful to disaggregate the FGF reforms into their different components and compare these with counterparts in other contexts separately.

This case study also informs observers about China's real political-administrative framework, about how ideas drawn extensively from Western experience have been adapted to fit with China's novel institutional arrangements including its party-state system, which in turn is also being influenced, at least at the margins, by those ideas.

The practices of recent administrative reforms in China, specifically the FGF reforms, reviewed briefly in this chapter, provide an important case for public administration research. While the FGF reforms have been extensively pursued across China, important variations across agencies and localities merit further research. Future studies should pay close attention to the evolution of the FGF reforms and dig further into their processes and consequences. For instance, to what extent have the FGF reforms reshaped relations within government (e.g. central-local, inter-agency, inter-jurisdictional) or between government and others (e.g. market, society) and affected the overall party-state? Cross-country comparisons could also be pursued to identify divergences and convergences in many aspects of the FGF reforms, including but not limited to regulatory reforms, public service delivery innovations, and administrative decentralisation.

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