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## **Concluding comments: Common challenges amidst sharpening differences**

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### **Abstract**

These concluding comments represent a personal reflection from someone closely involved with the Greater China Australia Dialogue on Public Administration from the beginning.

This volume of papers arising from the Dialogue's 10th workshop explores more recent developments in public administration in the PRC, Taiwan and Australia and prospects for the future. The chapters demonstrate how the fundamental differences, particularly in institutional arrangements and values, impact various aspects of public administration practice, but also reveal that there remain common challenges and scope for shared learning.

A summary of both differences and common challenges and shared lessons is followed by a brief discussion of possible shared principles across the three jurisdictions and an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of contemporary administrative practice against those principles that are common across the three jurisdictions.

Such shared principles fall well short of Western democratic principles, which are gaining renewed appreciation in Australia and Taiwan and other Western countries. There is some correlation between democratic principles

and economic liberalism and growth, leaving open the possibility of some future reconsideration in the PRC of the balance between state control and economic liberalism.

In the meantime, the sharpening differences present a challenge for academics wanting to engage with peers. Engagement is critical and, as demonstrated by this volume, it can be pursued judiciously without requiring individuals to compromise the values they hold dear.

**Keywords:** differences in public administration practice; common challenges; shared principles of public administration; rising tensions; engagement.

## Introduction

As discussed in the opening chapter, this volume of papers exploring recent developments in public administration in the People's Republic of China (including Mainland China and Hong Kong), Taiwan and Australia is in the context of sharpening differences and contested global developments. Inevitably, any comparative study of public administration across these three jurisdictions today must highlight the fundamental differences, particularly in institutional arrangements, but also in cultures and social and economic priorities. These differences were acknowledged at the first workshop of the Greater China Australia Dialogue on Public Administration held in 2011, but far more attention was given then to the common challenges and scope for shared learning across the jurisdictions (Podger and Bo 2013).

Even now, while the chapters in this book demonstrate how the differences impact on various aspects of public administration practice, they also suggest there remain many common challenges and the continuing potential not only to learn *about* how each jurisdiction is addressing those challenges but also to still learn *from* each other. The chapters reveal there is much borrowing of ideas, especially by the Chinese jurisdictions from Western nations (e.g. performance management and budgeting, participatory budgeting, civil service professionalism, social security systems, social service delivery through partnerships) but far less borrowing to date of emergent ideas from Mainland China by Australia, Taiwan and other Western nations.

Each jurisdiction, however, is determined to pursue its own values and not to be pressured to accept those of others. In the two Chinese jurisdictions in particular, this nonetheless has involved significant recalibration of

their values over time. In the PRC, shifts have occurred from the Mao era through the Deng and post-Deng ‘opening-up’ eras, and now under Xi. The values of Xi’s Chinese Communist Party (CCP) are not just communistic and nationalistic but embrace a return to a firmer anti-liberal approach and a mercantilist economic framework (though, as indicated in Chapter 1, the overall story is complicated). Also, perhaps for the first time ever (since the fifteenth century!), Xi’s China is pursuing a deliberate internationalist agenda. Taiwan today is more Western-oriented, moving to adopt more liberalist open government, after decades of dictatorial rule prior to the 1990s. It prizes liberal modernisation and personal freedoms over statist conformity. Australian values have also evolved, particularly if considered over the long period since World War II: from reflecting an enclave of British settlers to the values of a more multicultural society perhaps more confident of its Indo-Pacific geography and looking to reconciliation with its Indigenous peoples, but still firmly among the liberal democracies.

The differences between the three jurisdictions are also affected by their vastly different domestic media landscapes. In the PRC, while access to international media and information is far greater than in the Mao era, the domestic media is tightly controlled by the party-state and significant resources are devoted to monitoring and controlling communications. Taiwan exerts much less political control but its domestic media is fairly nationalistic. Australia has a relatively free domestic media and no limits on access to international media, though its cultural reach is largely limited to the Anglosphere; ownership of its media is also narrow and self-regulation weak so that more effort is devoted to scandals and sensationalism rather than serious discussion of governance and public policy. These differences have consequences for what can be done and can’t be done by governments.

## **Differences in public administration practice**

In each of the four thematic areas studied in this volume, important differences in public administration practice are apparent.

In the area of intergovernmental relations, Australia’s federal framework allows the states a degree of sovereignty (perhaps better described as semi-sovereignty or quasi-sovereignty given the national government’s dominant revenue powers); the states in turn have continued to limit the role of local

government. The PRC by contrast has a largely decentralised unitary system and has recently strengthened the central government's authority; its five-level government framework, reflecting the country's huge population as well as its geographic size, places much more emphasis on provincial and local governments. It also has sophisticated bargaining arrangements with tier one provinces and cities and is putting considerable effort into upgrading poorer provinces. Taiwan also has a unitary system but is attempting to strengthen the capacity of the big city governments in particular (especially in Taoyuan, Kaohsiung and Taichung) and to improve the performance of regional and local government bodies.

On budgeting and financial management, the CCP continues to operate an opaque policymaking process within a broadly socialist framework though it has also been giving emphasis to public finance reporting including performance reporting and audit assessments and has been experimenting with performance budgeting. Taiwan's and Australia's more liberal economic approach involves much greater transparency, including through integrating public policies and resource allocation and linking these at least in part to performance reporting and management.

Regarding the civil service, the PRC totally blurs politics and administration: indeed, under Xi, not only is there no political appetite to separate the spheres, but party control is increasing in intensity and surveillance. Australia and Taiwan continue to prefer a greater degree of separation between politics and administration with a professional, neutral, competent civil service (though political responsiveness is still an important imperative). However, both have relatively few public agencies truly independent of politics (as compared to many European democracies).

Regarding service delivery, the PRC is continuing to place considerable emphasis on economic development, mega-infrastructure projects and transport provision and 'approved' communication systems, and its incremental approach to anti-poverty and wellbeing improvements in social services involves firm government control. While also investing in infrastructure, Australia and Taiwan are focusing more on social services where they also place more emphasis on individual and constituency group rights and increasingly to the role of civil society in customised service delivery.

## Common challenges identified and shared lessons

In each of the four areas studied, the chapters also identify many common challenges despite the differences in public administration practices; in some cases, lessons may be learned for possible future adoption with suitable adaptation across jurisdictional boundaries.

In the area of intergovernmental relations, it is the PRC which has demonstrated the capacity to use these to systematically experiment with new policies and management practices, rather than Australia, despite Australia's federal framework. A common trend across all jurisdictions is towards *shared responsibilities* across levels of government, which imposes challenges for coordination and accountability. At the same time, all three jurisdictions are grappling with the challenge of clarifying respective roles and responsibilities and associated financial arrangements. Another common challenge for higher-level governments is to ensure service delivery is responsive to local needs and preferences while ensuring universal access and common standards. For example, both the PRC and Taiwan are now legislating minimum standards and setting improvement targets, and requiring more consistency in the quality of delivery.

On budgeting and financial management, all three jurisdictions face major challenges following the COVID-19 pandemic and the emergency health, economic and budgetary responses to it. Budget repair will prove very difficult but is critical given the enormous increase in public debt arising from the pandemic response. Linking budgeting and financial management to performance remains an articulated common priority despite the record of indifferent efforts in attaining this goal over many years (and despite some potent political obstacles). There is also common interest in improving transparency (even if in the PRC this seems to focus only on after-the-event reporting) and in public accountability (in the PRC's case partly to support the legitimacy of the CCP regime by building public confidence and satisfaction).

Regarding the civil service, there is common interest in enhancing its technical capability and managerial performance. All jurisdictions still display an overt old-fashioned bureaucratic character, despite the emergence of changing societal norms and citizen expectations, and the prevalence of disruptive technologies. Applying merit remains a common challenge,

with the concept of ‘merit’ being interpreted somewhat differently in each jurisdiction (Podger and Chan 2015). Across these different concepts of merit are the challenges of ensuring political ‘fit’ and ‘can-do-ism’ as well as technocratic competencies. An associated challenge across the jurisdictions is balancing fairness in administration (ensuring universal access and impartial management) and responsiveness to the political executive.

Among the common challenges in service delivery is the optimal use of new digitalised technologies, which can be used to enhance efficiency and responsiveness to individual citizens and different communities without undue infringement of human rights. All three jurisdictions are also making more use of various types of partnerships with non-government organisations to deliver public services, raising challenges for regulation and oversight. Another challenge concerns how best to address rising pressures for enhanced services, including in health, aged care and disability support, balancing taxpayer-funded support and personal financial contributions (and government and family responsibilities).

## **Possible shared principles of public administration**

These common challenges and potential sharing of lessons suggest there may be some shared principles of good public administration across these jurisdictions, notwithstanding ideological and institutional differences. The following can be inferred from the chapters in this book:

- Concern for the longer-term notion of the public interest, despite much short-termism in decision-making;
- The importance of a robust culture of public service, including responsiveness to citizens and communities (particularly for essential services and basic entitlements and accessibility);
- Efforts to improve transparency and accountability (at least for deliverable outputs and access regimes);
- Professional, competent and effective administration; and
- Fairness in administrative procedures and treatment of clients, and equity of access to essential services.

Some of the chapters suggest going further to encompass such ideas as citizens' engagement and participation, protection of human rights and the existence of checks and balances, but at present these would not be endorsed sufficiently across all three jurisdictions to be included in a list of shared principles.

## Common strengths and weaknesses

As evidenced throughout the contributions in this book, there has been a range of improvements in public services in all three jurisdictions over the last decade. In the PRC, enormous steps have been taken to develop a comprehensive social security system and health insurance and services for the aged, to expand and strengthen the education system and to address environmental problems; plus, of course, the extraordinary development of infrastructure. Taiwan and Australia have also seen ongoing, if more modest, improvements: in medical care, preschool education, public housing, transportation and infrastructure in Taiwan; and in health, disability services, childcare and retirement incomes in Australia, as well as infrastructure such as the NBN (national broadband network).

The picture for public sector management is more mixed and there have been some common developments of concern, breaching the possible shared principles mentioned above:

- Increased 'politicisation', aimed at closer political executive control of public services seems likely to have been at the expense of fair administration and responsiveness to citizens;
- This may also have adversely affected the capability of professional, competent and effective administration;
- The associated diminution of open deliberation and respect for evidence and professional analysis may have contributed to a tendency towards short-term management rather than longer-term strategic planning in the public interest.

An ongoing question for all jurisdictions is whether their governments will follow through with their commitments to address these and related concerns, especially as the ruling composition of governments will inevitably change over time, even in China.

## Renewed appreciation in the West of democratic principles

Rising international tensions have led to some renewed appreciation in Australia and Taiwan (and other Western countries) of the benefits of democratic principles, going beyond the possible shared principles identified above. These are not just about regular elections and changes in government but encompass also the rule of law and separation of powers, impartial and inclusive administration, freedom of speech and assembly and associated human rights; supporting these principles are an environment of a well-educated and informed population and a free and responsible press (Podger 2022).

The relationship between such principles and economic liberalism and growth remains somewhat unclear. While there may have been some naïveté in the West that the PRC's 'opening-up' reforms including the use of markets both domestically and internationally would lead eventually to democratic political reform, the market liberalisation of the 1980s and 1990s did deliver more personal freedoms and greater government transparency as well as improved living standards for most of the population. Equally, there is growing evidence that the PRC's more recent increase in authoritarianism with a winding back of some economic reforms is adversely affecting future economic growth and living standards more generally, not just human rights (Rajah and Leng 2022).

This leaves open the possibility of some future reconsideration in the PRC of the balance between state control and the economic liberalism needed to pursue its objective of becoming a 'moderately wealthy' nation. A return to a more liberal economic approach, if reciprocated in the West (countering recent protectionist pressures), might also ease tensions as it would tend to lead to shared economic benefits even if it did not directly protect human rights.

In the meantime, there is some recognition in the West of the need to repair damage done over the last decade or so to the application of democratic principles among Western nations themselves, particularly as the West criticises the policies and actions of authoritarian political regimes (Podger 2022).



## Implications for engagement

The deep concerns in the West about the PRC's increased authoritarianism and disregard for liberal-based human rights and the international rule of law present a particular challenge for academics wanting to engage with peers in the PRC and other increasingly authoritarian regimes. At the same time, engagement in the other direction is also made more difficult by concern in China of Western disregard of its legitimate standing and success under its governance system.

Engagement is vital, keeping lines of communication open, ensuring understanding of how different jurisdictions operate and make decisions, and also providing valuable support to peers who may be facing pressures that are limiting their academic freedom. Engagement requires an open mind to different cultures and traditions, and to institutional arrangements that differ greatly from those in the West. But care is needed to ensure engagement does not serve to condone or legitimise constraints on academic freedom or human rights.

This book tries to steer an appropriate balance, engaging with scholars and practitioners across the very different jurisdictions, respecting those differences, helping readers to understand contemporary public administration in the three jurisdictions and promoting continued dialogue. It allows contributors from each jurisdiction to express their own views based on empirical assessments when describing and analysing recent developments. In recognising growing international tensions, it does not try to force a shared view; equally, here in this concluding chapter, I have tried to add my own personal perspective.

Comparative research is complicated and fraught with terminological differences, but it has the benefit that researchers can identify similarities and differences, perhaps have more confidence in making generalities about systems and identifying the significance of case differences, thereby looking anew at their own jurisdiction's practice.

Engagement is important and, as demonstrated by this book, it can be pursued without requiring individuals to compromise the values they hold dear.

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