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Review Essay

Social Management or Social Governance: A Review of Party and Government Discourse and why it Matters in Understanding Chinese Politics

Abstract

The political report given by Xi Jinping at the 19th National Party Congress in late 2017 introduced the concept of “a social governance model based on co-construction, co-governance, and co-sharing.” This essay explores the use and interpretations of official discourse on governing society since the late 1980s to understand what is new about this concept. I examine key central documents and scholars’ interpretations of their language in order to analyse the changes in the Party’s stated thinking on governance, and to demonstrate the importance of central document analysis in understanding Chinese politics. I find that the term social governance does not have one clear, static meaning and that to argue otherwise would be misleading. Rather than developing in a linear way, as is often assumed, the concepts used in official discourse are found to be ambiguous and at times contradictory. This plays two important roles. It creates space for scholars to use official discourse as a channel for political participation, while at the same time facilitating the use of official language as technique for governing its users.

Keywords

social governance; Chinese politics; discourse; Communist Party of China

Central documents are a crucial resource in the analysis of Chinese politics. They signal priority issues to the entire Communist Party of China (CPC) and government, and contain the discourse that sets the vague but compelling boundaries which delineate how organizations and individuals can “legitimately” think and talk about their work and how they work in practice. In this essay, using two governance concepts as an example, I argue that engaging with the Chinese academic literature can demonstrate how central documents and political discourse are used as a governance technique by both Party and government. This discourse, and scholars’ use of it, creates a restrictive political participatory channel. When this is overlooked it can cause us to misunderstand, or miss the point, of much of the Chinese debate. Yu Keping has remarked that “using Chinese political key words as a starting point to analyse the shifts in politics and the changes in political discourse to observe real-life political processes, is an especially important perspective for analysing real politics in

China” (2016, 4). Without knowledge of the evolving political discourse on a given topic, it is difficult to understand the necessarily artfully-articulated arguments of domestic scholars, which is a great weakness in our understanding of Chinese politics. As those interested in Chinese politics seek new ways to understand Chinese “governance” (Shue and Thornton 2017), this essay examines the role that political documents and a deeper engagement with the Chinese literature can play as an approach to doing just that.

The essay begins by tracing the apparent shift, from the late 1980s to the present, in official discourse from social management (社会管理) to social governance (社会治理). This demonstrates the development of the two terms as being initially vague, sometimes contradictory, and ultimately non-linear. It shows that the concrete meanings that we assume terms to have often do not exist, or at least are ephemeral, changing over time and in different contexts (Barthes 1994). This in turn suggests that instead of seeking definitive answers to what a term means it can be more useful to treat it as an amorphous vehicle that is given its concrete meaning further down the policy chain as different actors apply their own interpretations. It then surveys different approaches used in the Chinese-language literature to interpret these terms, showing the expanding and contracting space for interpreters to give concrete meaning to inherently vague or ambiguous concepts. The aim of this section is not to answer definitively what the original authors of political documents intended these terms to mean, but to demonstrate how the space for interpretation is used and can change. I then use examples of the “Party leadership” (党的领导) and “the people” (人民) to show how concepts can be made *more* ambiguous by their context. Ultimately, political concepts, including the terms that are the focus of this paper, are found to be grounds for political contention over which arguments about fundamental values and policy directions can be played out. But like other spaces where such contention can take place, this space is in a constant state of flux.

Discourse of Social Management and Social Governance (1988-2018)

Central Committee third plenary sessions are generally thought to be a moment when decisions of exceptional importance are announced. In 1978, the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee shifted the Party’s focus from “class struggle” to “socialist modernization,” launching economic reforms. In 2013, the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee announced that the ultimate objective of deepening reforms is to modernize the national governance system and governance capacity. In the Resolution of the latter session another term was given its first major public outing: “social governance.” This new term had, it appeared, replaced the seemingly inelegant “social management,” and was widely seen as being indicative of an “elevation” in thinking at the top. However, if we look closer, cracks

appear in the apparently smooth linear progression. When single terms are coupled with a broader reading of political discourse, questions arise that lay assumptions bare.

The term “social management” (社会管理) was first introduced formally in November 1993 (Zhou 2018, 331). The 14th Central Committee’s Third Plenary Session Resolution called for government’s “social management” functions to be strengthened to ensure the “normal running of the economy and decent social order.” In the years that followed, the term appeared sporadically, and was fleshed out with a little more detail.¹ Documents from this period suggest that this vague term developed as a way of imagining government’s new functions now that it was pulling back from directly managing the market. It was also used loosely to refer to the need to manage society so as to maintain the stability needed for economic growth.

Prior to this, the communiqué issued to explain the 1988 State Council Agency Reform Plan had referred not to “social management,” but to “social affairs.” It stated that “government cannot and need not take on all social affairs itself” and that it should instead rely on companies, associations, and social groups.² The focus was on tentatively looking into using channels outside the structures of government to attend to social matters.

However, in February 1989, Deng Xiaoping made the portentous statement that “The issue in China is that overriding everything else is the need for stability” (Deng 1993, 284). The tension among stability, reform, and development has been a dominant force over the last three decades in both Party and government policy. The preoccupation with stability has produced what some scholars call “stability-over-all thinking” (Wang et al. 2014, 17) and has remained stubbornly pervasive, with “leaders in each administration from Deng to Xi all treating ‘stability overrides all’ as the core value underpinning governance” (Yu 2018, 21). Notions of stability and how to maintain it may have changed, but the fact that this principle has continued to be “the main standard for assessing public governance” has not (Yu 2018, 21). It was in this broad context, in 1993, that “social management” made its debut.

In 1998, five years after its first appearance, “social management” was established in that year’s State Council Agency Reform Plan as one of the three basic functions of government. Alongside it, and therefore viewed as separate functions, sat public services and macroeconomic regulation. This was also the first time that public services were treated as a basic government function (Jiang and Chen, 2018).

It was after Hu Jintao became Party general secretary in 2002 that the term came to the fore. In late 2006, the 16th Central Committee’s Sixth Plenary Session Resolution included a full subsection on social management, stating the need to “innovate the

¹ For example, in a 1996 speech on managing risks to economic growth Jiang Zemin cited specific issues – urbanization and migrant workers – as increasing the difficulty of “social management.”

² This does not suggest the distinction between such organizations and government was clear. The plan calls for “filling them out” with “contingencies of government workers.”

social management system” and “refine the social management setup (格局) whereby Party committees lead, government is responsible, society cooperates, and the public participates.”

In an important speech in 2008, marking the 30th anniversary of reform and opening, Hu spoke of social management in the context of an appeal to work not only for economic efficiency but for social “fairness and justice.” In calling for “commitment to development that is for the people, relies on the people, and produces benefits shared by the people” he states, among a short list, “we are earnestly strengthening social management” (Hu 2008). It was around this time that experiments began across the country in “social management innovation” (社会管理创新) (Yan 2017).

In February 2011, the Central Party School held a seminar for provincial- and ministerial-level principal leading officials on “Social Management and its Innovation.” These seminars have, since 1999, become an important mechanism in the Party and government system. They are used as an opportunity for top central-level Party leaders to address top provincial- and ministerial-level government leaders on key and urgent issues (Zou 2014). That such a seminar was held on innovation in social management is a clear indication of the attention being given to this topic the year before the top leadership transition from Hu to Xi.

It is commonly accepted that the first use of the term “social governance” (社会治理) was in November 2013 under the Xi-Li first-term administration. However, it was actually first used in July 2012 by Hu Jintao. At another seminar for provincial- and ministerial-level principal leading officials, during the lead-up to the 18th National Party Congress, Hu stressed the need to “Move forward with political reform...developing broader and fuller people’s democracy,” seeing that “the people practice democratic elections, democratic decision-making, democratic management, and democratic oversight” and “paying more attention to the important role of rule of law in national and social governance...guaranteeing social fairness and justice, and ensuring that the people, according to law, enjoy broad rights and freedoms” (Hu 2012). At the 18th Party Congress in November that year, Hu added “rule of law guarantees” to the “social management setup” mentioned above.

Around a year and a half after Hu Jintao first used “social governance,” in November 2013, Xi Jinping, now general secretary, used the term in the 18th Central Committee’s Third Plenary Session Resolution: “Innovations in social governance must focus on protecting the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the people (最广大人民)...must comprehensively promote the Safe China Initiative [and] protect national security.” This emphasis in 2013 on social governance’s relationship to security and order forms an interesting contrast with its context in Hu’s seminar speech in 2012.

In spite of a common assumption that “social governance” replaced “social management,” this is not true as a basic category of government functions. In fact, the 18th Central Committee’s Third Plenary Session Resolution, in a section on “correctly executing government functions,” states the need to strengthen the duties of local governments in “social management.”

Social *management* appears today as one of a list of five basic government functions, as we see in the 2018 “Deepening Party and State Agency Reform Plan” drafted by a team headed by Xi Jinping. This is an odd contrast with the 2018 Government Work Report which, in its summary of the last five years, claims that government has, “with a commitment to performing government functions in accordance with the law, focused on strengthening and innovating social *governance*.” Given these apparent inconsistencies in the use of “management” and “governance” in political discourse, we must question our assumptions about the linear progression from one concept to the next and what this might mean.

The often vague, ambiguous, and even apparently contradictory use of political language also highlights the need to understand and engage with the Chinese academic literature in a different way. Scholars and others outside the government (including the imperial) system have long “deployed literacy as a tool to project their influence, create new social roles, and generate forms of authority” (Thornton 2007, 16). Perry Link (2013, 247) has illustrated how “people with different interests” might use a key phrase “under fundamentally different assumptions” and suggests that the ambiguity of “carefully crafted” terms and phrases can play important roles for officials at different levels in the Party and government apparatus, for example, enabling lower officials to “squeeze their own viewpoints into phrases that had already been anointed from above as ‘correct’” (2013, 248). This is also true of those outside the Party and government systems, with the ambiguity of political language being used by different actors to encourage an understanding of terms and concepts according to their own preferences. In reading the work of Chinese scholars that engages with political language and concepts, it can often be helpful to understand this work as a form of political participation in itself. Doing so can help us to navigate the subtleties and look beyond the surface of such writing, as important arguments can often be semi-hidden within official-like language and vapid filler passages.

[Interpreting Shifts in Political Discourse](#)

This section reviews several interpretations by scholars and officials of the official discourse on social governance. What this demonstrates is, first, the ambiguity or vagueness of the terms to begin with, and second, the different purposes and pressures that shape Chinese actors’ interpretations at different times. I argue that engaging with the Chinese literature demonstrates how political discourse itself is used as a governance technique by the Party and government. It creates a restrictive

political participatory channel for those who engage with this discourse. The risk of overlooking such dimensions is that we misunderstand, or miss the main point, of much of the Chinese academic debate.

One of the most common approaches in addressing the shift to “governance” is to ask how changes in discourse can be reflected in practice (Sun 2015; Tang 2015; Zhou 2016). Scholars using this approach often do not give a direct or explicit interpretation of official terms, and do not seek to explain what the Party discourse means on its own terms. Rather, they utilize shifts in discourse to suggest favoured interpretations to discuss what terms *could* mean. Drawing on Andrew Mertha’s work (2009), we might think of this as a kind of unofficial re-framing of official framing. This is made possible by the vagueness and ambiguity of official discourse. Also, as Zhou Hongyun points out, there is a clear demand for such interpretations: “If systematic theoretical guidance is lacking, policy in practice will likely lose direction and not find a realistic way forward” (2016).

The work of scholar Wang Ming, who has been researching civil society organizations (CSOs) in China for over two decades, is a good example of this approach. After the first appearance of “social governance,” Wang submitted a proposal on the subject to the 2014 session of the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference using a line from a central Party document as his title. Wang framed his proposal, which argued the need for more power and resources to be channelled to CSOs, as a suggestion to help achieve the Party’s goal of “innovating social governance and unleashing social dynamism” (Wang 2014a). This was eleven years after his first proposal arguing for a pluralistic form of social governance in 2003 (Wang 2013).

Also in 2014, Wang co-authored a book chapter with Lan Yuxin in which they repeat much of the main text on social governance from the 18th Central Committee’s Third Plenary Session Resolution and add to this their own interpretation. They argue that the aim of the reform in the social governance system is to “return governance to society” and shift away “from a *Party- and government-guided model* to reliance on rule of law and *social self-governance*” (italics added, Wang and Lan 2014, 140). This, today, seems like a bold interpretation because the Resolution itself, in its paragraph on “improving social governance methods,” called for “*strengthening Party committee leadership, giving play to the main guiding role of government...[and] achieving government governance*” (italics added). The space for public (publishable) interpretation that departs significantly from the original text seems at that time to have been greater than it was to later become. By the time the 19th Party Congress Report was issued, Wang had come to re-evaluate this interpretation. His analysis of new shifts in discourse was that “the one-character difference [from management to governance] shows clearly that the weight has shifted from Party-state-shouldered public management to *consultative co-governance*” (italics added, Wang 2018b).

Consultative governance clearly places society in a passive position and is thus far less bold than Wang's first interpretation of returning governance to society. A significant shift in the boldness of interpretation such as this is likely prompted not only by the specific wording of the political text being referred to, but by the broad political atmosphere for such interpretive exercises.³

In engaging with the Chinese literature, it is worth noting that such interpretations often appear as a seamless combination of lines from political documents copied without a clear indication of their origin and the author's own argument, which is not explicitly presented as one of a possible number of readings. What is in fact an argument for a scholar's own favoured policy that uses political language to give the idea authority, legitimacy, and a protective barrier, can often be indistinguishable from an attempt to interpret political discourse "objectively."

Before social governance had "formally" appeared, but following its initial use by Hu Jintao, Chen Jiagang, working in a central Party think tank, argued the need for a shift from social management to social governance. In the atmosphere prior to the 18th Party Congress, Chen discussed the problems of social management and listed what he saw as the primary obstacles to a substantive change to social governance. First, "social governance" (社会治理) is often twisted into the "governance of society" (治理社会), such that society is regarded as simply an object of management. Second, there is a prevalent view that the ultimate aim of social governance is maintaining stability. Stability, he argues, is achieved not by stifling but by removing obstacles, not by force, suppression, and crackdowns but by deliberation, debate and cooperation. Third, "social construction" (社会建设), essentially a top-down project to build, shape and develop society, should not be viewed as just a way to improve welfare but as a way to promote democracy. Combining Deng Xiaoping with Karl Marx, he argues that ultimately "the point of crossing the river by feeling the stones is to get from this bank to the other, from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom" (Chen 2012).

After the Third Plenary Session in 2013, Zheng Hangsheng interpreted the shift from social management to social governance as a kind of innovative marriage between best international practice and "indigenous Chinese features" (2014). On the difference between the "ideal types" of social management and governance, he argued that management is top-down, semi-democratic and controlling due to the government's dominant guiding role, whereas governance is both top-down and bottom-up, democratic, and includes diverse players, all of whom are equal (Zheng 2014). This takes place under Party leadership and government guidance, which Zheng sees as the Chinese indigenous, and advantageous, part of social governance.

³ It is beyond the scope of this paper to expand in detail on the concept of the "broader political atmosphere" but this is also something that can be understood better through analysis of central documents. For example, in the last few years the annual Government Work Report has contained an unprecedented amount of content about following the Party, e.g. the mandate to maintain Four Consciousnesses (四个意识).

Giving an example of how this should work in practice, he explains social governance must involve residents' self-governance to avoid being solely a top-down affair. But the model he suggests still seems to be government-led, with society playing a passive role: government must first teach residents how to self-govern and then press them to develop community self-governance (Zheng 2014). This is quite a contrast with Ma Qingyu's interpretation of the official term social governance, which privileges creating space for social actors to use themselves (Ma 2017). Interestingly, while the contrast between the arguments of Zheng and Ma is stark, the language they use to develop their arguments is similar. This is likely in part a result of the atmosphere that the latter was writing in and the need that this created to word arguments subtly. Understanding their work fully requires us to pay careful attention to detail and excavate the key points from within thick layers of padding.

Yan Jirong argues that "social governance" means *both* "the management and control of social affairs by government" *and* "social self-governance." Yan sees the development in the discourse as a positive move by the state because society must now be regarded as one of the subjects of management rather than purely as an object. Yan argues the need for a "strong government, strong society" model to encourage "a society long-accustomed to being managed" to learn to manage itself and to stop the state from attempting to take everything on or leaving things unmanaged (Yan 2017).

Within the patchwork of different interpretations, we find a kind of playing field on which scholars use the space created by the ambiguity of political discourse to tease out their own meanings in a kind of contentious wordplay. Some push with measured intensity, sensing the space available for interpretation in what law professor Ma Changshan likens to a high-wire act (Liu et al. 2013).

Another approach in interpreting shifts in discourse is to attempt to address the political terms more directly. Perhaps the most direct statement on how "social governance" should be interpreted in the political discourse comes from Wang Puqu. Wang (2014b) argues that social governance includes three dimensions: government's governance of society, government and society cooperating in the governance of society, and self-governance by society. The first is the most important, and the second and third are also closely linked to governance by government. Wang minces no words: "social governance" as the Party and government use it should be understood as "the governance of society" (2014b). Social governance, as it is used in the political discourse, is Party-led, mainly government-guided, and involves absorbing social organizations to participate (Wang 2014b).

A third approach of interpretation is that by direct practitioners. Zhan Chengfu produced a report on social governance as part of a training course for provincial- and ministerial-level officials at the Central Party School. Zhan, already a member of the Ministry of Civil Affairs' Leading Party Members' Group (党组) and head of the national Social Organization Management Bureau, was most recently made Vice-

Minister of Civil Affairs. Zhan wrote that some local Party committees are relaxing or diluting Party leadership over social governance and reported a growing trend among Party members in government when “faced with the reality of the growing diversity and pluralization of players involved in social governance” to “knowingly or unknowingly weaken Party leadership” (Zhan 2018).

Zhan’s report addressed how, based on his interpretation of social governance, Party leadership should be exercised and executed by government. He argued the need for both “hard” and “soft” approaches, with the former including the governing body’s tough attitude, the severity of institutions, and the obligatory nature of the “rule of law methods” and the latter involving “ideological education” or “thought work,” “moral persuasion” and “typical cases to show the way.” Zhan cited common failures of social governance work by Party members, including a failure to act when faced with “erroneous trends in thinking”; a failure to “criticize or resist” the “unrealistic demands of the masses”; and a failure to do thought work among the masses (Zhan 2018).

This report is a window onto one strain of thinking within the Party and, given Zhan’s role, within government. It shows how the Party’s use of “social governance” can be interpreted by someone charged with the national-level role of managing social organizations. The idea that “thought work” (思想工作) should be a technique of governance suggests that while the participants may be diverse, their views may not be pluralistic. Here, we see the tension that arises in practice between the officially recognized need to diversify the participants involved in “co-governance,” and the vague but non-negotiable notion that the Party must lead everything. This leads to more recent trends in official discourse on social governance since after the 18th Party Congress, which I now turn to.

The importance of Party leadership is always a consistent theme, but since the 18th and particularly the 19th Party congresses we find increasing emphasis on the notion that the Party leads everything in every field. How is this vague and intensifying call for Party leadership to be translated into practice in social governance? We know that “while the actors involved are already more pluralistic, among them the most important are the organizations of the Communist Party” (Yu 2018, 20). We know that in the “social governance setup” it is specifically Party committees that are to lead while no other actor “government, society, the public” is clearly specified. We also know that leadership by the Party is an incontrovertible precondition. Given this, if the concept of “leadership” is undefined, even nebulous, can social governance as a model embrace cooperation based on equal partnerships between multiple actors?

An important example is the relationship between Party organizations and CSOs, with the involvement of the latter seen by many as pivotal in the change from social management to governance (Ma 2017; Tong and Yu 2011; Wang et al. 2014; Zhou 2018). Recent drives in Party building have demanded Party cells be established in

CSOs. Although this has long been required, new mechanisms are being created to make Party cell establishment necessary to the involvement of these organizations in social governance.⁴ We know that the Party is, to borrow from Patricia Thornton (2013), “advancing.” Yet the precise ways in which the Party is to “lead” and society is to “cooperate” remain ambiguous, and in part depend on the interpretation of actors putting vaguely-worded directives into action.

A second important ambiguity relates to the “organic unity between Party leadership, the people as masters of their own houses, and the country being governed by law.” This involves the relationship between Party and the two main agencies of public power—the government and the people’s congresses. As Wang Changjiang puts it, “The Party leads everything, but the Party is a political organization not an agency of public power, and it can’t, as a single body, exercise public power...we still can’t say that we’ve found the most scientific way of linking [the Party and public power agencies]” (Wang 2018a). The 2018 “Deepening Party and State Agency Reform Plan” which, unlike previous state reform plans, deals with both Party and government, is a strong indicator of potential changes in the relationship between Party and government. Yet still there remains much ambiguity about how the leadership-responsibility relationship of the “social governance setup” is to work in practice. The relationship between the Party, the government, and the law is also changing, with deep implications for social governance in practice.

Third, the Party is at once both the “vanguard of the Chinese people” and the leading organization in the social governance setup. In a liberal democratic political system, the relationship underpinning governance models is that between government and citizen. In contrast, underlying the official Chinese political concept of social governance is the relationship between the Party and the people. Here, “the people” refers to the political concept *renmin*, meaning not individuals but the people—or most of them—as a whole (Schoenhals 2007). In social governance there is a clear ambiguity in that there are no explicit boundaries or rights and responsibilities divided between Party and people as there might be between a government and its citizens.

Interpretation and Implementation in Practice

With these ambiguities or tensions in mind, I next examine three fundamental dimensions that shape scholars’ interpretations of social governance, and its implementation in practice: values, democracy, and law.

A strain of literature which has gained less attention in relation to social governance in mainstream academia focuses on the Party’s mission of establishing

⁴ For example, in some places, to be eligible to take on government contracts a social organization must have a three-star evaluation rating. Without sufficient Party building within the organization, it cannot be granted this rating.

one set of Core Socialist Values as the single moral system to underpin governance. In December 2013, the Party's General Office issued the "Opinion on Fostering and Practicing Core Socialist Values," which includes a whole subsection on Core Socialist Values in economic development and social governance. A year later, the 18th Central Committee's Fourth Plenary Session Resolution stated "National and social governance require law and virtue to play a joint role. We must grasp rule of law with one hand and rule by virtue with the other, [and] vigorously champion Core Socialist Values." This might be seen as part of a wider project "to ensure that consensus to the state's prescribed values is not undermined by competing discourses" and as ultimately "represent[ing] a shift in focus under the current Xi Jinping Administration to emphasize the superstructure over the economic base" (Gow 2017, 92).

Scholars focusing on this question are often found within the Party school system. For example, at the Central Party School, as part of a research project entitled "A Study on Xi Jinping Thought for New Era Socialism with Chinese Characteristics on Social Governance" Ding Yuanzhu (2018) gives a comprehensive account of Xi's remarks on social governance. This includes using the Core Socialist Values to guide "human feeling" (真情), which is at the heart of social governance, according to his understanding of Xi Thought on the matter (Ding 2018).

From the local Party schools, Yin Hongyan gives an example of "a common problem in social governance" that can be solved by the Core Socialist Values: "When expropriating land and moving people off it for public infrastructure projects" some "are able to put the country's interests first and feel it shameful to speak of interests" while others "think that because China is now a market economy, their private property is sacrosanct" (2014). Yin argues that fostering Core Socialist Values through social governance will bring individual needs into line with the objectives of society as a whole. This interpretation is echoed by Shang Yungang, who understands the Core Socialist Values to be a corrective to the issues arising from the pluralization of values. Shang's interpretation is inspired in particular by the official call for social governance to "serve the overwhelming majority of the people" (2016). Here, we see the importance of the concept of *renmin* in understanding "social governance." Outside of the Party school system, we also find the argument that the Core Socialist Values are an answer to the "difficulty" or "challenge" of increasingly pluralistic value systems in social governance (Li, Sun and Li 2015). Others see social governance as a means to actively champion the Core Socialist Values in order to solve this "problem" of pluralism (Yang and Wang 2015).

A second fundamental dimension that underlies interpretations of the term social governance is its connection to democracy. Huang Weiping (2018) makes the important observation that since the 18th Party Congress, the Party leadership has begun to stress the Four Confidences—confidence in China's own path, theory, system, and culture—effectively redefining "Chinese-style democracy" (Huang 2018,

140). Huang contrasts the periods before and after the 18th Party Congress, and finds that during the pre-18th Congress period decision-makers were experimenting with primary-level elections, while in the post-18th Congress period the focus shifted to building primary-level governance systems and capacity. The 17th Party Congress Report stressed “democratic elections” first in a line-up of four forms of democratic practice—elections, decision-making, management, and oversight. After the 18th Congress, elections were viewed with increasing caution and instead the stress was shifted to the latter three, which, Huang argues, together form the Party’s notion of “democratic governance” at the primary level (2018). The weight of discourse on “democracy” has shifted away from a range of possibilities and toward democratic centralism and consultative democracy (Huang 2018).

The third dimension of the context in which “social governance” is developing both in discourse and practice is the drive to “govern the country by law” (全面依法治国). The central documents issued following the 18th Central Committee’s Fourth Plenary Session when this recent drive was launched make clear that Party leadership is essential to the “rule of law with Chinese characteristics.”

In practice, government officials’ interpretations of this drive along with that to “strictly govern the Party” (从严治党) are crucial, and can threaten to thwart innovation in governance within government. Yang Xuedong (2017) warns that in the interpretations of some, these drives are conflated with increased supervision, blurring the boundaries between supervision and decision making. An environment has developed in which officials choose inaction when there is no existing legal basis for something; put initiatives superficially through the procedural paces; seek instruction higher up on every last thing; and are of the mentality that “the rafter that sticks out is the first to rot” (2017, 6). This prompts the pursuit of passable results and stability rather than genuine innovation in social governance (Yang 2017). If innovations in social governance are perceived to have gone awry, it falls on the leading government official. This means that the way government departments and their officials interpret these terms and their broader context is crucial, making the ambiguities discussed above all the more important.

Meanwhile, the work of Liu Peifeng forces us to think about the effect of the combination of a nascent “rule of law with Chinese characteristics” with rule by man. Liu points out that while there is a positive side to the building up of the legal system, there is also another trend accompanying this drive. The litany of normative documents on subjects like consultative democracy, the united front system, and mass organizations show that “public power is moving deeply into society, and gradually becoming our leading technique for social governance...society is being squeezed and suppressed and internalized by public power (Liu 2018).

In short, “normative documents” (Liu 2018), campaigns to accomplish “ideological education” and “thought work” (Zhan 2018), and sporadic “political

tasks” as opposed to legally defined duties (Yang 2009), all threaten to undermine the rule of law and its bearing on social governance in practice. A dual approach seems to be evolving whereby the law is brought into play to “standardize” (Sun 2011) and restructure state-society relations (Tong and Yu 2011), but this is supplemented by rule by man (including rule by virtue) where perceived necessary. Meanwhile, the increasing use of law and institutionalization in general creates difficulties in practice for social actors as the space to innovate and the tacit allowance of non-legal CSOs is shrinking rapidly (Jia 2016).

Conclusion

The argument that social governance marks an elevation or improvement in thinking from social management is common in the Chinese literature. Interestingly, this is true both for those who argue that the concept demands greater freedom for social participation and for those who focus on stronger Party control. Crucial to remember is that in the Chinese political narrative, official discourse only ever moves forward, within the one-party system, former policy is rarely criticized in anything but the most roundabout way. This review finds that the individual political terms “social management” and “social governance” are not concrete concepts but are ambiguous and used in strategic rather than legal ways. Their use both over time and in relation to other concepts proves to be multidirectional and multi-layered, rather than clear, consistent and following a unidirectional linear flow toward a new model of governance. Given that what has become clear through this review is a lack of clarity, why examine central documents at all and not focus exclusively on practice?

When examining individual concepts, both over time and within the broader context of central documents, words act as a lens to trace developing trends in thinking and conceptual shifts. The discourse also affects the rhythms of political practice, because when new documents are issued the onus is on all implicated parties to interpret new terms and study the “spirit” that underlies them.

One of the most compelling arguments for a close examination of central documents is that it highlights contradictions and raises questions about assumptions that we may have formed using other methods such as interviews or reliance on scholarly analysis. It also shows the ambiguities that are perhaps where the crux of the answers, or at least the best questions, lie.

By reviewing Chinese literature on these specific terms, we see the space for interpretation being given shape in practice, be it by advocating pluralist change through formal political channels or using interpretations to train cadres or CSO staff who will put concepts into practice. It is the vagueness, ambiguity, and contradictions of terms and their use that creates this space for actors to re-frame them. Using an art analogy, this space is less like positive space – the part within the sketch – and more like negative space – the space left over outside it. The “real” meaning of terms might

never be clear; it is the space around them and its limits that must be understood by the interpreters. Engaging with the literature can help us to better understand this space.

Finally, it is this same tension and ambiguity that allows terms to become a governance technique in their own right. The need to interpret ambiguous terms is an important element of governance itself. The role of political discourse in governing the governors is a topic that deserves serious attention. As Göbel and Heberer (2017) found in exploring the idea of governing officials with the imperative to “innovate,” the means of influencing officials’ behaviour can be hidden in places easily overlooked as bland or innocuous. Terms like “social governance” are, by nature of Chinese political language, slippery and demand interpretation, but interpretation relies on an actor’s understanding of an ever-expanding and shifting body of discourse. The trend toward institutionalization of campaigns to study political documents, such as the inclusion in the Party Constitution of the requirement to regularize “Two Studies, One Do” (两学一做),⁵ shifts the dynamics of the interpretation game. It shrinks the space for error and dampens enthusiasm for pursuing possibilities in areas like social governance where innovation is demanded. Meanwhile, the institutionalization by inclusion in the Party Constitution of ambiguous “requirements” such as the “Four Consciousnesses” (四个意识)⁶ changes the environment for interpretation.

This essay has found that the terms “social management” and “social governance” have different meanings depending on the context, the time, and the actor using them. The most interesting cases are those where their use differs between government and Party documents, between levels of government, and from administration to administration. The shift from “management” to “governance” cannot be understood as being indicative of a simple and coherent shift toward more pluralist forms of social governance. In fact, this essay argues that searching for clear, definite and static meanings of such terms is futile, and claiming that such meanings exist would be misleading.

Analysis of central Party and government documents is an essential part of understanding Chinese politics. Tracing the longitudinal development of concepts across Party and government documents at different levels—which have different roles, interests, and challenges in interpreting them—can help us to understand how policy is developing and where areas of contention lie. It should not be a linear process that we are searching for, but the anomalies and contradictions that test our assumptions and findings from other methods. This can then be used in conjunction with a close reading of the Chinese academic literature, knowing that the latter can be

⁵ To study the Party Constitution and regulations and Xi Jinping’s policy addresses, and to live up to Party standards.

⁶ To maintain political integrity, think in big-picture terms, follow the leadership core, and stay in alignment. First introduced in 2016 at a meeting of the Central Committee’s Political Bureau.

used as a form of political participation, to better understand the “negative space” available for such interpretive exercises. In particular, under the present administration, such analysis demands greater patience and attention to detail to unearth the deeper layers of meaning in the interpretations of those actors who continue to tread the high-wire.

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