CHAPTER ONE

30 YEARS OF CHINA’S GOVERNANCE REFORM (1978 TO 2008)

Yu Keping
Translated by Elizabeth Jane Hayward-Smith

Abstract

This paper systematically surveys the dominant processes and key issues of China’s governance reforms over the 30 years since the reform and opening period began. It summarizes the major achievements and the ongoing problems of this 30 year long process. The paper offers a brief analysis of the underlying reasons for these reforms and the main characteristics of China’s governance model. After enumerating an array of factual evidence, it claims that the main thrust of China’s governance reforms is from unitary governance to pluralist governance, from centralization to decentralization, from rule of man to rule of law, from regulatory government to service oriented government, and from internal party democracy to people’s democracy.

Keywords: Governance, Democracy, Political Reform, Governance Model, Government Innovation

This article will first survey the dominant trends and key issues of China’s governance reform over the past 30 years, discussing their content, methods, targets and orientation. Following a brief analysis of the empirical basis of these reforms, there is an attempt to provide a preliminary summary of the major achievements and persisting problems of the reforms, and the main characteristics of the Chinese model of governance are outlined.

1 Introduction: The Reforms and Opening and Changes in Governance

Beginning in the 1990’s, the word “governance” became a popular term in Western social science and, since the start of the 21st century; it has also become an important word in Chinese academic circles. In China the term “governance” was first adopted by economists, and terms such as “corporate governance” or “corporate governance
structure” began to be widely used in discussions of corporate transformation and enterprise restructuring. Since then, political scientists and subsequently sociologists adopted the term, using it to refer to state governance and public governance respectively. In the field of political science, governance refers to administrative activities and processes carried out by public authorities in order to actualize public interests. Governance (zhili 治理) and governmental rule (tongzhi 统治) have aspects in common as well as substantial differences. One of these substantial differences is that the task of governmental rule can only be executed by agencies of government authority, while the tasks of governance can be carried out by governmental organizations as well as non-governmental organizations or joint government and civic organizations. The focus of government is the organs of the state, while the focus of governance is the whole of society. Just as there is a distinction between “good government” and “bad government,” there is also a distinction between “good governance” and “bad governance.” Good governance is the process of managing to maximize the public interest.¹

The pursuit of good governance is the common goal of every country’s government. State governance and public governance both come under the category of political administration. The activity of governance is a form of political activity embodying certain political values. Thus, the reform of governance constitutes an important part of political reform, and the system of governance forms an important part of the political system. But in contrast to government, in governance technicalities are more important than values. In social and political life, the operation of governance is a kind of political activity that tends to emphasize the technological aspects. Governments under different political systems all hope to have more efficient administrative systems, lower administrative costs, better public services and more support from citizens. That is to say, every country’s government hopes for better governance. It is only through constant reforms and innovations that governments can achieve good governance. Therefore in recent years one country’s government after another has turned to public