Contractual Thinking and Responsible Government in China: A Constructivist Framework for Analysis*

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Abstract

Responsible government is often seen as contingent on democracy. Yet despite China’s continued lack of notable progress in democratization, recent years have witnessed some limited moves towards responsible governance. In the absence of free elections and other institutional arrangements, how can an authoritarian regime become responsible? This paper turns to the role of ideas and culture in general and contractual thinking in particular for an explanation. Contractual thinking, defined as a particular kind of intersubjective understanding between the government and citizens with regard to their mutual interests, is present in both China’s contemporary official discourse on...
“responsible government” and traditional Chinese culture. Taking a constructivist approach, the paper focuses on two interrelated aspects of the role of contractual thinking in the construction of responsible government. First, it examines how contractual thinking, by helping redefine the identity and interest of the government in line with citizens’ loyalty, could allow more responsible government behaviour. It then illustrates that in the case of government irresponsibility, contractual thinking sets the discursive context for rightful resistance from citizens as well as for a more sympathetic reading of such resistance by the government, both of which, the paper argues, could facilitate the development of responsible governance.

**Introduction**

Responsible government seems to be intimately linked to democratization. Many important ingredients of good governance, such as the rule of law, transparency, accountability and respect for human rights, are commonly believed to be affiliated with democratic institutions, especially free, fair, competitive, and regularized elections. According to Bentham and Mill, through liberal democracy, the governors can be held accountable to the governed. Against this backdrop, the issues of China’s democratization and its enabling infrastructure and institutions such as civil society, public sphere, and village elections have been one of the main focuses of a vast body of literature on Chinese politics. Clearly, the democratization and institutionalist perspectives are important in understanding the sources of responsible government, but the purpose of this paper is to explore the possibility and dynamics of responsible government in China despite the continued authoritarian rule of the party-state. Responsible government and authoritarianism have often been treated as antonyms, yet the gradual evolution of China from totalitarianism to authoritarianism seems to suggest that limited responsible governance is possible before democratization takes place. Otherwise, the unusual resilience of the Chinese authoritarian regime, which has thus far defied repeated predictions of its impending collapse, would be difficult to fully comprehend. However limited the extent of China’s responsible government may be, failure to come to grips with it is to ignore an important piece in the ongoing puzzle of Chinese political change and continuity.

Given China’s apparent lack of democratic transformation, the