China's Toilet Revolution as Public Goods Provision:
Local Governance of Public Toilets in Peri-Urban Shanghai

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The concept of governance has been extensively studied over the past several decades. The foundational conceptions to governance have been considered through two logics. One regards governance as a synonymic concept of government (Stocker 1998); the other relates governance as a governing process, governance without government (Rosenau, 1992). Through these two approaches, governance has been explored and posited by many disciplines, such as economics, developmental studies, political science, public administration, global studies, to name a few. Due to the expansive usage and various definitions, the concept of governance has been broad, and its application has been diffusive. Hence, there is no consistent definition of governance that has been accepted across disciplines (Bevir, 2012, 2013; Chhotray & Stocker, 2009; Fukuyama, 2016). Yet, even with the discernment, two fundamental pillars of the concepts of governance are usually found across various schools of thought: the state and society.

Of the 12 fellows from *Pandemic World Research Seminar (PWRS)*, two scholars have paid close attention to governance. Based on a state-level analysis, Dr. Fukuda-Parr compared the actions of states fighting with COVID-19 and its social and economic consequences. She argues that the strong capacity of both governmental institutions and society in the Asia Pacific Region played crucial roles in managing the public health crisis during the global pandemic. Similarly, Dr. Cohen studied effective governance under COVID-19 through the neighborhood level of analysis. By comparing the neighborhood responses to the pandemic by three villas in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Dr. Cohen and his colleagues found that a villa's response capacity to unexpected situations can be varied by factors such as local historical settings, financial and physical characteristics, as well as within and beyond governmental interactions. In comparing the two approaches, Dr. Fukada-Parr relies on a global and state level of analysis, while Dr. Cohen uses a street-level analysis.

Situated between these two levels of analysis sits my project on China's governance of the Toilets Revolution, taking a meso level approach to the analysis. The study and results presented at *PWRS* were preliminary research findings of my doctoral dissertation. It focused on China's central government and its below-national level ministries, situated as a meso level analysis. The State Council of China functions as the ultimate governing authority over provincial governments and manages national ministries. Provincial governments reside on the corresponding next tier, followed by local governments. As the governance hierarchy goes down, it ends with the township level governments. Meanwhile, there are 26 ministries managing public affairs at the central level, such as social welfare and social assistance, health

services, urban and rural affairs, etc. These ministries operate and work directly with their counterparts at the local levels. The corresponding bureaus are parts of the local government. The ministries and bureaus do not have mandatory authority over provincial or local governments; instead, ministries can only provide advice to the provincial and subordinate bureaus within their systematic hierarchy.

Governance Framework

My theoretical framework is embedded in the governance literature to understand the interplay between these levels of government in China. Although the conceptions of governance were mostly born from research and postulation in Western and democratic societies, the literature can still offer rich theoretical foundations for explorations of non democratic and less-developed countries. The concept of governance reveals different understandings and interpretations of authority and its political exercise. The literature on governance can be divided into three major categories: state-centered governance, society-centered governance, and state-society-focused governance. Accordingly, the various forms of governance can be distinguished into two types: top-down and bottom-up governance. The former emphasizes the state and exists in more centralized societies. The latter accentuates grassroots-level participation, networks, and partnerships, usually in democratic or weak state societies.

I adopted Pierre & Peters's (2004) definition on governance, which is characterized as "some mechanism or process through which a consensus, or at a minimum, a majority decision on social priorities and objectives can emerge" (p. 3). Although they suggest approaching governance via the state-society relationships, especially when examining the pursuit of collective interests, they still believe that state remains the central role in discussion of governance. Hence, Pierre & Peters (2004) highlights the "role of government in society" in the debate on governance (p. 6). Given this institutional perspective, governance can be seen as a process of a state managing public resources to deal with public affairs. The state can encompass public institutions, political authorities, parties, public ministrative, and multi-tiered government.

This institutional standpoint of governance leads me to consider China's governmental institutions when examining its public toilets management. China's governance encompasses two major institutions, the state and the society. The former can be divided into multi-tiered governments and various administrative divisions; the latter consists of business sectors, NGOs, grassroots, etc. Understanding the interplay between these various sectors can build upon the understanding of governance, especially in the conception of an authoritarian society.

Methodology

Due to the ongoing travel restrictions in China, I have decided to use public information and policies posted on governmental and administrative websites as my empirical data. The public information found on these sites generally speaks of governmental actions, such as

official plans, laws and regulations, institutional behaviors, etc. Given this type of data, the research is considered a content analysis.

Starting with the State Council's official website, I first collected 250 pieces of official posts on public toilets. I then narrowed the data based on recency, content relevancy, and textural originality. I kept all posts published from 2015 to 2020. Meanwhile, any irrelevant information not pertaining to public toilets was deleted. Governmental posts with other local focus were ignored. In addition, repetitive information was also not included in the final dataset. Eventually, 94 pieces of information were sourced from the central government. This initial dataset helped me identify seven ministries involved in public toilets affairs: five ministries and two national commissions. These ministries that manage the following social issues: Agriculture, Housing, Cultural and Tourism, Finance, Ecology, and Environment. Further, one of the two commissions is for National Health, and the other is for Development and Reform.

Following the same above methodology on the seven ministries, 304 pieces of information were added to the existing dataset. Among these governmental sectors, 82 pieces were published during the first three-year period (2015-2018); 316 posts were issued from 2018 to 2020. These official posts can be categorized into three different types:

1) Governments' statements, such as documents, policies, regulations, notices, reports, guidance, etc.

2) Responses to both official administrations and the public;

3) Public information, for instance, new articles, press conferences, government department meetings, interviews, policy interpretations, etc.

Initial Findings

The preliminary dataset collected from the central government and seven other national-level bureaucracies uncovers certain intra-governmental relations and civil engagement traits. The process of China's governance on the Toilet Revolution possesses a conventional managing style, with the central government sets up various plans, general aims, vague targets for guiding the ministries to work on more concrete procedures. The governing process involves one or multiple institutions. The vertical relationship between the central government and national ministries seems open and even democratic in some ways; however, this could be proven more authoritative if lower-tiered governments were included for analysis. The horizontal relationships among the involved ministries are cooperative and coordinative. The next step in the research will be to collect and compare data from the lower government institutions.

Another key finding supported by the dataset is that the governance of public toilets possesses a dual system among urban and rural spaces. Public toilets in urban spaces (or famous tourist spots in rural areas) were targeted to improve tourism quality. By contrast, those public toilets in rural areas were aimed at three aspects: the construction of New Socialist Countryside;

poverty alleviation; and ecological improvements, such as on water, sanitation, and environmental protection. Under the COVID-19 circumstances, both urban and rural areas treated public toilets as the frontier for fighting against the disease. While broader society was included in the governing process through civil engagement and public participation, it was firmly controlled and tightly guided by the official administrations.

The preliminary research leaves room for future discussion on local administrative governance. To achieve a holistic understanding of China's governance on public toilets, information from local level governments needs to be included in the dataset. In addition, the preliminary research results are still limited due to scope. Although Levi-Faur (2012) indicates that the theories of governance do not explain causal relations, it would be interesting to examine China's local governance with a comparative eye. Beijing and Shanghai could be great cases. These two provincial-level cities offer rich and rigorous data on public toilets, though each with distinct features. Beijing locates closely with the central government, while Shanghai enjoys certain freedom and a relatively free-market economy. I hypothesize that the government-based Beijing and the market-based Shanghai will lead to different governance processes. For this comparison, I will build on the current dataset with a collection of policy data in these two cities to give a richer comparison group for the final meso study of governance.

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