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Myths, instrumental reality, or cultural change? Modern service-oriented government reforms in China

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a greater understanding of the service-oriented government (SOG) reforms that China carried out at the central level in 2008, 2013, and 2018. These reforms involved two common post-NPM structural measures – namely, super-ministries and cross-ministerial networks or leading groups. Using a mythical, an instrumental, and a cultural perspective, this article examines how SOG reforms were carried out and enquires into the relevance of "Chinese characteristics." Our analysis shows that China's SOG reforms represent quite a complex and hybrid pattern with a dual orientation of service value and coordination action. The CPC's leadership of government reform and major work in all areas are fundamental characteristics of China's socialist administrative system.

Introduction

Most studies of reforms in public organizations, whether focused on one country or system, or cross-national or comparative, often deal with Western countries (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2017). Our knowledge is much less related to developing countries, and our article is meant to add to this knowledge by providing a case study of recent reform efforts in the one-party state of China, labeled "service-oriented government"(SOG), aiming at combining central coordination and improved services toward citizens. We try in our analysis of the reform process to combine analytical lens looking at reforms as myths/symbols, cultural characteristics and instrumental action (Christensen et al. 2007)

Following the heyday of New Public Management (NPM) in the 1990's, the second generation of government reforms known as post-NPM emerged in Anglo-Saxon countries and spread around the world. These brought a change of emphasis away from decentralization, specialization, and economic values, and toward recentralization, coordination, and public value management (Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg 2014; Christensen and Laegreid 2007a; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2017). In Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom, for example, the trend toward post-NPM was embodied in slogans such as "whole-of-government" and "joined-up government"(Lodge and Gill 2011). China's government reforms are also informed by some post-NPM features (Christensen and Fan 2018), mainly under the heading of SOG.

In China, the academic term 'service-oriented government' was coined in 2000 (Kangzhi 2000; Tian 2016) as a theoretical response to the negative effects of the NPM-related reforms of the 1980s and early 1990s.[1] After being put into practice first by some local governments, SOG was ultimately adopted and popularized by the central government in 2004 when Wen Jiabao, the

Chinese premier at that time, addressed principal leading officials at the Party School of the Central Committee of the CPC. In February 2008, the Second Plenary Session of the 17th CPC Central Committee approved the *Opinions on Deepening the Administrative System Reform* aimed at establishing a 'relatively stable socialist administrative system with Chinese characteristics' by 2020 through focusing on a mixture of elements, such as providing high-quality services, better organization and staffing of the public apparatus, increased standardization and legalization, social fairness, transparency, etc. (CPC Resolution 2008). In the political report delivered by General Secretary Xi Jinping at the 19th Party Congress in 2017, the goal of deepening institutional and administrative reform was stated as 'building a service-oriented government that satisfies the people' (Jining 2017). Thus, SOG is still the general goal of government reform in China (People's Daily Overseas Edition 2018), and the three rounds of central government reform launched in 2008, 2013, and 2018 represent a series of steps in an administrative system reform program aimed at building a SOG.[2]

Most literature about China's government reform has either focused on instrumental aspects and structural changes (Ma and Christensen 2018) or on the relevance of cultural traditions and Chinese characteristics (Lan 2000). However, it could be argued that myths, symbols, and rhetoric may also shape cognition and action and that 'terminology constitutes a forceful framing device for thought and action' (Fountain 2001). China is a promising case study for analyzing the myth aspect of government reforms, not only because of its periodic and extensive restructuring of the central government, but also because of its leadership's tendency to use symbols such as 'service-oriented government' and 'super-ministry' quite often to label its reform elements (Christensen, Lisheng, and Painter 2008; Lisheng, Christensen, and Painter 2010).

It could be argued that China's SOG shows a hybrid pattern whereby some reform elements of Old Public Administration (OPA), NPM, and post-NPM have been learned from the West and adapted to the Chinese political-administrative system. This article, however, attends specifically to the post-NPM elements and their dynamics in building SOG and improving China's administrative system. For this purpose, our study combines three theoretical points of departure taken from organization theory: a mythical perspective, an instrumental-structural perspective, and a cultural-value perspective (Christensen et al. 2007). Accordingly, by focusing on the central government reforms, our study tries to address the following specific questions:

- What characterizes the recent SOG reforms in China as a main post-NPM effort? What is their background and their main content, and how were they implemented?
- How can we interpret the SOG reforms from an instrumental, a cultural, and a myth perspective? Which structural measures do they employ? In what way do they reflect typical cultural features? What are some of their main myths?

The time scope of our analysis is limited to 2000–2008 and 2008–2018. The reason for this is that the term "service-oriented government" was coined in academic circles in 2000, so this is seen as the starting point of SOG reform preparation. Then, building an SOG was confirmed as official policy by the central government in 2004. Only the 2008, 2013, and 2018 reforms – i.e., those launched after 2004 – are oriented specifically toward SOG, so 2008 is therefore the starting point of SOG reform implementation. Thus, limiting the time period makes it easier to draw a distinction between reform preparation and reform implementation.

The major claim in the article is that the SOG reforms could be seen as hybrid and dynamic, in the sense that they represent major myths and symbols used by the political leadership, but also as adaptation to and filtered by cultural characteristics and as instrumental efforts (cf. Olsen 1992; Westney 1987).

The empirical basis for answering our questions is public documents, meaning documents showing major decisions and speeches of political leaders, and scholarly literature, both more empirically relevant Chinese studies and international studies covering relevant theories. The

access to personal interviews to supplement our data has not been possible, but we're referring to interviews with central actors.

The remainder of this article comprises five sections; the first briefly introduces the Chinese context for SOG reforms. The second outlines "service-oriented government" and some other key concepts and relates them to the main measures in the SOG reforms. In the third section, the three perspectives are presented as a theoretical framework. We then move on to describe the features of two central aspects of the SOG reforms—the process leading up to the decision on SOG reform and the SOG reform implementation process. Subsequently, we analyze and examine the post-NPM elements in the SOG reforms. From this analysis, we draw theoretical implications and identify specifically Chinese characteristics.

The Chinese context

Although public administrations all over the world have experienced major reforms in recent decades, reform approaches vary from one country to another (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2017). China is a unitary, multicultural state with a large population (almost 1.4 billion) spread over a large geographical area. Any discussion of China's approach to reform must therefore bear these circumstances in mind.

Socio-economic transition. The story of China's forty-year-old socio-economic transition from a centrally planned economy to a "socialist market economy" since its Reform and Opening-up in 1978 is well known. For China, economic reform is a key driver of government reform, which in turn constitutes an attempt to increase the capacity and efficiency of the (economic) bureaucracy and re-orient the governance system to economic values. This took place particularly in the 1980s and early 1990s (Ma and Christensen 2018). The transitional nature of this process suggests that government reform in China will be more frequent than in mature societies. Indeed, since 1982, eight rounds of institutional reform of the central government have been launched: in 1982, 1988, 1993, 1998, 2003, 2008, 2013, and 2018—almost every five years, in other words.

Party versus government. China is a unitary and one-party state in which government officials at all levels are nominated and appointed from above by the ruling Communist Party of China (CPC). As a result, while the Party and the government may appear to be separate organizations, they are substantially unitary. At the same time, the strong Party leadership means that before a plan for government reform is approved by the National People's Congress (NPC), the Party has already decided to initiate the reform. These attributes make it relatively easy to launch and sustain a reform, but also engender problems, such as redundancy and inefficiency, not to mention potential internal tensions.

Central versus local. China has a collectivist tradition, which stresses the conscious design of a centralized state based on collective goals, central control by political and administrative leaders, and the rule of law, though not in the Western sense of an independent judiciary (March and Olsen 1989, 126). Given the nature of China's top-down political-administrative system, government reform at the central level is of major importance. Top leaders consciously design the central government apparatus and initiate reform at the central level to fulfill collective goals. The governments lower down the administration at all four local levels (province, prefecture, county, and town) are supposed to mirror the central government reform in a virtually unitary manner (Ma and Christensen 2018). When the leadership perceives changes in the problems to be solved, another new round of government reform will often be launched from the top down. It could, however, also happen that reform ideas first are tried out in practice on the local levels, which was the case with the SOG reforms in China, and then used as part of templates by the central level (Drori, Hollerer, and Walgenbach 2014), but these features are not emphasized in this article.

Key concepts and main structural measures

Service-oriented government (fuwuxing zhengfu). The academic concept of "service-oriented government" in China was first proposed by Zhang Kangzhi in 2000 when he discussed the idea of limiting the size of government. Zhang argued that the historical development of human society is a primary determinant of service-oriented government. Just as rule-oriented government emerged in agricultural societies and management-oriented government was the dominant government model in industrial societies, the nascent post-industrial society has given rise to service-oriented government, a new model with a dual ethical orientation of service value and cooperative action (Tian 2017). Unlike the dual orientation of top-down hierarchical values and command-and-control action in rule-oriented government, or the one-dimensional economic values and the negative coordination on the basis of competing interests, namely competition-and-coordination action, in management-oriented government, the underlying logic of collective action in service-oriented government is positive coordination or cooperation (Kangzhi 2015; Tian 2017). This means that actors can replace top-down hierarchical values or one-dimensional economic values with service for the people as the key value.

Along with the theoretical debate around "service-oriented government", an academic school of activism[3] (Kangzhi 2014; Qian 2017) has been emerging in China, which argues that the world is increasingly becoming characterized by a high degree of complexity and uncertainty and that it is therefore necessary to focus on the coexistence and interaction of humans (Kangzhi 2016). For this school, cooperation refers not only to the collective action mode, but also to an organizational form—cooperative organization instead of bureaucratic organization, and even to an institutional system—cooperative governance instead of democratic governance[4] (Kangzhi 2015, 2016). In order to improve the ethical situation and restructure social governance, they have proposed using an ethical approach to build SOG in line with the social transformation toward a post-industrial society, with service value and cooperative action as inseparable ethical elements. Two features of this academic basis for SOG in China are interesting. First, it has definitely influenced both official decisions and practical implementation. Second, theoretically, SOG emphasizes the importance of cooperation mechanisms, but in such a centralized state as China, this SOG reform implementation has focused relatively little on the horizontal coordination aspects, even though they are evident, such as leading groups discussed in the following part.

Super-ministry or *super-department*. The term came to prominence in the US and the UK in the 1960s and 1970s, implying the integration of functions in a single large ministry or department to improve coordination and centralize control. The result is a smaller top decision-making group focusing primarily on larger strategic issues (Lisheng et al. 2010). Structurally, establishing a super-ministry means dissolving old organizations and replacing them with new entities. In such a government organization, both horizontal coordination among different units at the same organizational level and vertical coordination between top civil servants and lower-level officials are used to maintain organizational coherence. However, the basic logic of collective action is still top-down command-and-control. This means coordination, whether horizontal or vertical, can be accomplished via the exertion of authority from the top in a hierarchical structure, where command-and-control orders are passed down the hierarchical line (Egeberg 2012). In China, the super-ministry model was first introduced in the 2008 government reform.

Leading group, or *leading small group* (lingdao xiaozu). In general, leading groups are joint party-state organizations or mechanisms consisting of high-level officials in a given sector (Pearson 2007). There are four types of leading groups: those run by the Party, the State Council, and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) as well as a fourth type that cuts across those three areas (Miller 2008). Leading groups are usually temporary organizations established in accordance with the requirements of specific tasks. One example is the Leading Group for the Reform of the Administrative Examination and Approval System, which was in charge of administrative examination and approval system reform from 2001 to 2008. In theory, leading groups are not

formalized bodies in the political power structure but have informal cultural features, which means that goals are achieved in the course of a negotiation process, not given by political leaders, while informal norms and values are developed gradually. They are supposed to issue guiding principles rather than concrete policies and hence have no legal authority to issue formal orders to other agencies (Wang 2010). In practice, however, leading groups are structurally "configured around a vertical axis composed of the presiding leader, the presiding or convening office, and the group's general office[5]" (Miller 2014). They can rely on the presiding leader or the center to coordinate policy-making and policy implementation in a particular area, and their recommendations are often taken as a consensus (Huang 2014). This is in sharp contrast to the hierarchical coordination based on command-and-control in the super-ministry model. Coordination in leading groups is achieved less formally, by inter-organizational negotiation within a network.

The leading groups have long played an important role as a task-oriented coordinating mechanism in China's political-administrative system down to county level since its founding (Wang 2010). In the Mao era, for example, the most infamous leading group was perhaps the Central Leading Group for the Cultural Revolution established in 1966. In the Xi era, the most notable leading group has been the Central Leading Group for Deepening Overall Reform, an overarching leading group for guiding the sprawling package of reforms. Similarly, the State Council has long used leading groups to deal with a broad range of issues, such as the Coordinating Group for the Functional Transformation of the State Council established in 2013. Through the central leading groups, the Party can maintain an important supervisory and guiding role over governmental organs.

In the following, we will present a theoretical framework that makes it possible to better understand SOG reforms in China. Our intention is not just to describe the instrumental-structural effects but to explain how SOG as a myth is adopted both instrumentally and culturally. For this we need three perspectives—mythical, instrumental, and cultural—that help us understand how SOG reforms are implemented.

Theoretical framework

Our analyses of the SOG reforms in China are based on three perspectives from organization theory: mythical-symbolic, instrumental-structural, and cultural-value (Christensen et al. 2007). First, organizations can be understood as tools or instruments for achieving certain goals, such as the bureaucratic organizational form developed by Max Weber. Second, organizational culture has to do with informal norms and values that evolve gradually and become important for the activities of formal organizations (Selznick 1957). Third, a mythical perspective highlights adjustments to existing beliefs and values in the macro institutional environment (Meyer and Rowan 1977). The main difference between a cultural – and a mythical perspective, which both of which are seen as natural systems perspectives (Scott and Davis 2006), is that the cultural perspective stresses variety and the unique institutional traditions and informal values, while the mythical perspective focuses on broad global cultural and social processes creating convergence and isomorphic features. These three perspectives can interact with and complement one another. The main assumption is that in order to increase the legitimacy of public organizations, their leaders will adopt myths and symbols, which could not only function as "window-dressing" (Brunsson 1989), but also promote instrumental action and cultural integration (Eriksen 1987; Olsen 1992).

Critics may view myths as nothing more than rhetoric, merely denoting the manipulative use of language symbols to create a situation that is to the actor's advantage. Myths are indeed closely connected with the instrumental manipulation of symbols, since reputational aspects and "propaganda" are crucial for the stability and growth of modern political-administrative systems. However, as March and Olsen (1989, 49) put it, "Meaning develops within a context of action. Many of the activities and experiences of politics are defined by their relation to myths and

symbols that antedate them and that are widely shared". Public organizations exist and operate within certain institutional environments where they are confronted with socially created norms for how they should function (Meyer and Rowan 1977). If organizations and their leaders wish to obtain legitimacy from the external institutional environment, they must try to incorporate and reflect popular ideas and trends. Thus, myths as socially created norms or fashions are institutionalized in the cultural-value sense – i.e., it is taken for granted that they are the normative and preferred ways of organizing, at least for a period of time. The success of efforts to establish legitimacy hence depends partly on the extent to which public organizations incorporate and reflect myths that integrate cultural values and establish normative standards (Brunsson and Olsen 1993).

Myths can be further interpreted in the light of an instrumental-structural perspective. Besides the tendency toward instrumental manipulation mentioned above, "myths are more or less recipes for how to design an organization" (Christensen et al. 2007, 57–58). Modern organization theory has focused on ambiguity and uncertainty in all relevant criteria or institutionalized recipes for organizational choice. In complex and fluctuating situations, each myth merely describes how a part of an entire organization should be designed or reformed, instead of prescribing a complete solution. In this instrumental-structural frame, myths are not merely instrumental manipulation, but also have a motivational rationale in a changing organizational structure. That is, myths are an assortment of legitimated and popular organizational "recipes" that actors can use instrumentally to reform existing public organizations (Røvik 2002).

In sum, the functional scope of myths and symbols can be extended from the mythical-symbolic perspective in the sense of the establishment of legitimacy to the other two perspectives. Instrumentally, myths are presented as effective devices public organizations can use to achieve specific organizational goals, independently of the immediate effects of increased legitimacy and better prospects of survival (Brunsson 1989). Culturally, even if myths do not produce the expected instrumental effects, they can also function as window-dressing intended to convince people both inside and outside the organization that it has accepted these popular ideas as a way of creating social stability and cultural integration, either by underscoring traditional norms and values or by changing these in systematic ways. Specific to the prevailing reform myths in recent decades, culturally and structurally, NPM has a focus on one-sided economic values, such as efficiency and effectiveness, and structural devolution and deregulation, while post-NPM focuses more on public value governance, reregulation and structural integration, such as super-ministries and network arrangements (Bryson et al. 2014; Christensen and Laegreid 2007b).

In the following section, we will focus on two specific myths: service-oriented government and super-ministry, and figure out how they were adopted by the central government.

Reform preparation: 2000-2008

In the early 2000s, after twenty years of Reform and Opening-up, internal and external pressure led the Chinese leadership to look for a reform solution. Specifically, China's economic reform toward a socialist market system and its entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 entailed a functional transformation of the government to adapt to the new economic realities and the WTO requirements (Ngok and Zhu 2007). Against this background, in November 2002 the 16th Party Congress classified government functions into four types: economic regulation, market supervision, social management[6], and public services, and called for the establishment of an administrative system characterized by standardized behavior, coordinated operation, fairness and transparency, honesty, and a high level of efficiency (Jiang 2002). The first round of government reform in the new century was launched in March 2003, just after the Hu Jintao-Wen Jiabao leadership (2003-2013) had been elected. However, later in the September, after the 2003 reform was launched, the newly elected leadership was still looking for ways of introducing

innovations into government management (Wang 2008; Lisheng et al. 2010), as indicated by Wen's (2003) symposium on government management innovation and e-government in September 2003. Thus, it seems fair to say that the 2003 reform was more influenced by politics urgency, or the political cycle, than by any systemically designed reform policy, so as to maintain political stability. Some local governments went further than the central government, however. Between 2001 and 2004, Chengdu, Shanghai, Nanjing, and other cities were already building "service-oriented government" (Wei and Wang 2006).

As pointed out above, the concept of "service-oriented government" was coined in academic circles in 2000 to signify a new government model oriented toward emerging post-industrial society. It was quickly taken up and advocated by many Chinese scholars. According to Cheng Qian (2012), the number of articles devoted to "service-oriented government" published in 2001, 2002, 2003, and 2004 were 10, 78, 359, and 913, respectively. The emergence of SOG could partly be seen as a reaction to the negative effects of the NPM-related reforms of the 1980s and early 1990s. A crude form of marketization and over-commercialization resulted in more social inequalities, which lasted until the late 1990s (Lisheng, Cui, and Christensen 2015). Thus, as SOG gained currency gradually as a reform myth, local governments in particular, more than the central government, were subjected to increasing pressure to adopt new reform ideas advocated by scholars.

Following promotion by scholars and application by local governments, the central government finally confirmed building SOG as official policy in 2004. From the government's point of view, SOG was more about public services than about running the economy. With a view to transforming government functions, around 2005 the State Commission Office for Public Sector Reform (SCOPSR), which is responsible for approving the organization and staffing of the State Council organization, and the Chinese Public Administration Society (CPAS), commissioned studies on administrative reform practice, including the experience of super-ministries, in developed countries and their suitability in China. SCOPSR published a three-volume series on government ministries and departments in 100 countries in 2006 and continued to commission studies on super-ministries as late as the first half of 2007 (Lisheng et al. 2010).

In addition, the CPAS research project yielded a number of academic articles focusing on how these borrowed reform ideas should be adopted. The consensus was that these ideas should be put to the test structurally and culturally to see whether they complied fundamentally with Chinese norms (cf. Westney 1987). In one such article published in the journal *Chinese Public Administration* hosted by the CPAS, Gao Xiaoping, the Secretary General of CPAS at that time, and Shen Ronghua (2006) expounded on SOG as the general goal of deepening Chinese administrative system reform, with the super-ministries as one possible instrumental model. In addition, a group of prominent scholars, mainly from the Party School of the Central Committee of the CPC, published a book on reform of the Chinese political system (Tianyong, Wang, and Wang 2007). In introducing the book, the publisher claimed that before its publication, the general report and eight sub-reports comprising the text of the book had been submitted to the central departments between the end of 2006 and February 2007 and hence played a very important and constructive role in the political decision-making at the 17th Party Congress (Lisheng et al. 2010). Specifically, the general report and some of the sub-reports advocated three variants of the super-ministry model as specific measures for deepening administrative system reform with Chinese characteristics and building a "public service-oriented government".

As such, it could be argued that the borrowed idea of the "super-ministry", viewed as an international reform myth by many Chinese scholars and reformers, was filtered through Chinese cultural lenses after which it was defined as an instrumental means to deepen administrative reform (Wang 2008) and build SOG in the local setting and hence benefit the Chinese administrative system (cf. Brunsson and Olsen 1993). Finally, at the 17th Party Congress in October 2007, the concepts of "service-oriented government" and "super-ministry" were both put on the official

public political decision-making agenda in the Party report delivered by Jintao (2007), then General Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPC. On February 23, 2008, the Political Bureau organized a group study session devoted to discussing promoting the construction of SOG and improving the government's ability to "serve the people" (Jintao 2008). A few days later at the Second Plenary Session of the 17th CPC Central Committee, further steps were taken toward exploring and establishing the super-ministry model in government reforms.

In addition, greater emphasis was put on ethical considerations and value concerns. Compared with the West, which has its Christian and democratic traditions layered on market capitalism, China has Confucian and socialist traditions, both stressing collective values. The *Program for Improving Civil Morality* issued in September 2001 and the socioeconomic vision of a "harmonious society" proposed by Hu in September 2004 not only signaled a clear shift in the party-state's focus from "exclusive promotion of economic growth to solving increasing social tensions" (Lisheng, Cui, and Christensen 2015; Gao 2010), but also indicated that a new cultural path was emerging to modify one-sided economic growth, which could be viewed as an economic value of NPM. This value orientation shift could also be illustrated from the functional transformation of the government. According to Zhiren and Yanqing (2016), before the 2003 reform, the focus of functional transformation was on economic management, while from 2003, the focus was on social management and public service delivery in order to maintain stability and promote equality. Furthermore, in March 2006, Hu put forward the socialist concept of honor and disgrace, the core of which consisted of "Eight Honors and Eight Disgraces". Among the eight honors or virtues advocated were loving the Mother Country and serving the people. In October 2006, the Sixth Plenary Session of the 16th CPC Central Committee called for the construction of a "core socialist value system" that would include the socialist concept of honor and disgrace.

As an amalgamation of traditional Chinese virtues and modern values, these cultural elements and value concerns constitute the basic institutional and value environment for SOG reforms. Of course, they are designed for everyone and therefore do not give civil servants unique identities. However, Chinese public institutions have a host of cultural mechanisms that aim to incorporate values into the political-administrative system and shape collective values among civil servants. These come from the politicized education system, including the Party School of the Central Committee of the CPC and the group study session of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee mentioned above, as well as from socialization and disciplinary instruments. The latter include national propaganda campaigns, politicized study campaigns, and also anti-corruption campaigns, especially in the Xi-Li administration, dealing with social inequality and strengthening political control over the government as a whole (Christensen and Fan 2018). These campaigns are aimed at rebuilding social trust amid concerns that as China has become the world's second-largest economy after its three-decade economic miracle, it is losing its moral compass.

In this section, we have presented how the two myths service-oriented government and super-ministry were ultimately adopted by the central government. Service-oriented government was first coined as an academic concept in 2000. After being put into practice by some local governments, service-oriented government was finally adopted by the central government in 2004. By contrast, super-ministry was borrowed from the West. In 2007, both service-oriented government and super-ministry were put on the official public political decision-making agenda in the Party report. Next, we will see what has happened in 2008, 2013, and 2018 reforms that were undertaken under the label SOG by focusing on an instrumental perspective and a cultural perspective.

Reform implementation – three rounds of reforms in 2008, 2013, and 2018

The past decade has witnessed three rounds of central government reform in the name of service-oriented government – in 2008, 2013, and 2018. The first round of SOG reform was initiated in February 2008 when the Second Plenary Session of the 17th CPC Central Committee approved

a resolution entitled *Opinions on Deepening the Administrative System Reform* and a *Plan for the Institutional Reform of the State Council* — the latter was submitted to the 11th NPC in March 2008 and subsequently endorsed. This reform introduced the super-ministry model. As a result, five super-ministries were set up by merging existing departments: the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, the Ministry of Transport, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, the Ministry of Environmental Protection, and the Ministry of Housing and Urban-rural Development (Hua 2008). In addition, other measures were adopted to strengthen central coordination. For example, a more detailed State Council Notice on deliberation and coordination agencies was issued to regulate and standardize the establishment of coordination agencies. Accordingly, a total of twenty-nine agencies were retained or set up, while twenty-five old ones were abolished (State Council Notice 2008). Nevertheless, this reform fell well short of public expectations (Lisheng et al. 2010). Among the five so-called super-ministries, only the Ministry of Transport was close to people's expectations, although it failed to incorporate the railways industry. By contrast, the other four ministries represented more or less a restoration of the old situation or an upgraded replacement of the former agency.

In February 2013, the Second Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee approved a *Plan for the Institutional Reform and Functional Transformation of the State Council*, which was announced by the First Session of the 12th NPC in March 2013. During this reform, the Ministry of Railways was divided into administrative and commercial arms, rather like ministries in many EU countries. More concretely, its administrative functions were transferred to the Ministry of Transport, an existing super-ministry formed in the 2008 reform, while its commercial functions were carried out by the newly established China Railway Corporation. In this sense, this reform could be seen as a continuation of the 2008 reform. In addition to this, the National Health and Family Planning Commission, the General Administration of Food and Drugs, the General Administration of Press and Publication, Radio, Film and Television as well as the State Oceanic Administration were also established or reorganized to deal with related coordination matters (Ma 2013).

One measure in this reform that is often overlooked is the establishment of a cross-ministerial Coordinating Group for the Functional Transformation of the State Council. This body was designed to guide and coordinate ministries and departments to carry out relevant work according to the reform schedule. A few months later, in November, the Third Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee decided to establish a Central Leading Group for Deepening Overall Reform headed by Xi, in charge of overall reform design, arranging and coordinating reforms, pushing forward reform as a whole, and supervising the implementation of reform plans. Two years later, in 2015, the Coordinating Group for the Functional Transformation of the State Council was renamed the State Council Coordinating Group for Promoting Functional Transformation headed by Zhang Gaoli, the vice premier at that time, according to a Circular of the General Office of the State Council.[7] This coordinating group consisted of six special groups, including a Group for Administrative Examination and Approval Reform, and four functional groups. These groups that include a high-level official or a Politburo Standing Committee member as the leader can bring over a broad policy area to a single conference table and help cut through bureaucratic roadblocks. Thus, the objective of these moves is to avoid negative intra-organizational coordination and move toward positive inter-organizational coordination in the form of leading groups and coordinating groups.

The on-going SOG reforms also involve initiatives to make values a pervasive influence on the government. In his final report delivered at the 18th Party Congress in 2012, Jintao (2012) proclaimed: "We should promote prosperity, democracy, civility, and harmony; uphold freedom, equality, justice, and the rule of law and advocate patriotism, dedication, integrity, and friendship, so as to cultivate and observe core socialist values". Later, in December 2013, to foster core

socialist values and realize the "China Dream" of national rejuvenation, the Party issued a guideline for practicing core socialist values, stressing that these should be incorporated into social governance.

Compared with the common core values, SOG-specific values often take the form of a values statement, expressing values based on cultural path-dependency and endowing the SOG with a unique identity (cf. March 1994). Specifically, in 2012, the SOG-specific values statement contained a range of values including efficiency, namely "a well-structured, clean, and efficient service-oriented government with scientifically defined functions that satisfies the people", according to Hu's report to the 18th Party Congress. In 2017, at the 19th Party Congress, the SOG-specific values statement went beyond efficiency by focusing on "a service-oriented government that satisfies the people" (Xi 2017). In short, despite apparently providing a new label for the old service commitment, SOG is fundamentally different from NPM reform ideas that focus only on essential public service provision, because of its value orientation of serving and satisfying the citizens instead of the customer specifically (cf. Aberbach and Christensen 2005). Because of the Party's commitment to serving the people, SOG and serving the people (citizen), not customer specifically, can increase the legitimacy of public organizations. But at the same time, SOG is also broader in focusing also on catering to business, in different ways, and doing so using modern information technology, such as one-stop shops, which could be viewed more as post-NPM features than as NPM elements, though.

The latest round, also the third round of SOG reform was launched in March 2018. On March 17, 2018, the First Session of the 13th NPC adopted a *Plan for the Institutional Reform of the State Council* as part of the broader *Plan for Deepening the Reform of the Party and State Institutions,* which was approved by the Third Plenary Session of the 19th CPC Central Committee on February 28, 2018. Under the newly launched reform, the number of ministerial-level agencies was reduced by eight and the vice-ministerial-level agencies decreased by seven. As a result, besides the General Office of the State Council, the number of constituent departments increased from twenty-five to twenty-six. More concretely, these newly established departments, which are characterized by the super-ministry model, include the Ministry of Natural Resources, the Ministry of Ecological Environment, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the National Health Commission, the Ministry of Veterans Affairs, the Ministry of Emergency Management, etc. (Wang 2018). Most notably, the Ministry of Supervision has been dissolved and merged into the National Supervisory Commission, which is also a newly formed supreme anti-corruption agency with the same administrative ranking as the Supreme People's Court and Supreme People's Procuratorate, reporting to the NPC and its Standing Committee.

In addition, many other agencies were reorganized to strengthen central coordination, enhance central control, streamline the central government machinery, and improve essential public service delivery (Wang 2018). For example, a unified Working Committee for Central and State Organs was established as a dispatched agency of the CPC Central Committee to replace two former separate organs, the Work Committee for Departments directly under the CPC Central Committee and the State Organs Work Committee of the CPC Central Committee. In addition, four primary leading groups headed by General Secretary Xi, including the Central Leading Group for Deepening Overall Reform, were updated and transformed into more formalized and institutionalized special committees, e.g. the Central Committee for Deepening Overall Reform, implying that by using coordinating mechanisms, the Party is exercising stronger leadership over major work (China SCIO 2018). At the same time, the SCOPSR and the State Administration of Civil Service were also put under the direct guidance and control of the Organization Department of the CPC Central Committee. Moreover, in line with the leadership's wishes for further "streamlining administration, delegating power, strengthening regulation, and improving services" (fangguanfu gaige) and for speeding up the transformation of government functions, in

Table 1. Overview of China's SOG reforms at the central level.

	Main theoretical framework	Key point	Main content	Reform effect
Reform preparation: 2000-2008	Mythical perspective	How myths of SOG and super-ministry were adopted by the central government	Myths SOG: adopted from Chinese academia; Super-ministry: borrowed from the West	Increased legitimacy
Reform implementation: 2008-2018	Instrumental and cultural perspectives	What has happened in 2008, 2013, 2018 reforms under the label SOG	Instrumental reality Super-ministries 2008 reform: five new super-ministries were established, 2013 reform: the Ministry of Railways was divided into administrative and commercial arms, 2018 reform: new super-ministries such as the Ministry of Emergency Management were established. Leading groups 2008 reform: a total of twenty-nine agencies were retained or set up, while twenty-five old ones were abolished, 2013 reform: the Coordinating Group for the Functional Transformation of the State Council, etc., 2018 reform: the Central Committee for Deepening Overall Reform, etc. Cultural change Core socialist values (2012: prosperity, democracy, etc.) SOG-specific values statement (2012: a well-structured, clean, and efficient SOG with scientifically defined functions that satisfies the people; 2017: a SOG that satisfies the people)	Increased legitimacy Strong post-NPM features

July 2018, the State Council Coordinating Group for Promoting Functional Transformation was renamed the State Council Coordinating Group for Promoting the Transformation of Government Functions and the Reform of "fangguanfu" and placed in charge of five special groups and four functional groups.

Summing up, the reforms implemented during the last decade have strong post-NPM features. First, they have obvious horizontal features, i.e. both the super-ministry and the leading groups are trying to increase horizontal collaboration and coordination. The networks of the leading groups have the potential of dissemination of information and learning (Powell 1990). Second, the reforms combine horizontal features with obvious vertical ones. The reforms are initiated and controlled by the central political leadership, the new structural forms are anchored in the top leadership and the leadership tries to restrict access to the top level, i.e. they "push the level of coordination" downwards but keep it at a rather high level in potentially more powerful structures (Egeberg 2012).

We have summed up the theoretical arguments and the reform features in Table 1.

Analysis – hybrid reform features with Chinese characteristics

It is obvious that reform ideas are an important component of the reform process, but ideas do not necessarily synchronize with practice. Actually, despite exceptions like NPM, which was identified, labeled, and then theorized, reform ideas usually antedate practice and exist as institutional environments—namely, myths (Brunsson 1989; March 1994). Public organizations and their

political leaders may feel pressure from institutional environments including intellectuals, public opinion, and other institutions to prove their legitimacy, making them open to domestically or internationally fashionable ideas about governance problems and appropriate solutions to deal with them (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Sahlin-Andersson 2001). As discussed above, during the preparatory process, the terms "service-oriented government" and "super-ministry" were both gradually becoming fashionable ideas and reform myths, generated by academics and then accepted by the Chinese leadership.

According to a mythical-symbol perspective, pubic organizations can gain or increase their legitimacy by using reform myths, in other words, by showing that decisions are oriented to appropriate goals, or by showing that decisions are made in appropriate ways that symbolize valued qualities, given that "legitimacy often depends as much on the appropriateness of intentions as it does on outcomes" (Eriksen 1987; March and Olsen 1989, 49-50).

In the case of China, a state that excels in using symbols to guide its political-administrative system, government reforms are carried out partly for legitimacy reasons. Regarding the appropriate goals, the Chinese leadership accepted "service-oriented government" as the general goal of government reform, while as appropriate means, the leadership adopted "service-oriented government" and the "super-ministry" templates from academics, local governments, and the West (Lisheng et al. 2010). Serving the people is always stated as the doctrine of the socialist state, and service-oriented government as a general goal therefore accords with the Party's commitment to serving the people, but also business. At the same time, reform and opening-up is politically right for transitional China. Thus, Chinese government officials often tour other developed countries to learn about reform elements, such as the super-ministry model, and modernize China's governance system and governance capacity accordingly (cf. Sahlin-Andersson 2001). Furthermore, the observable features of normatively approved decision-making, which include information gathering, consultations, symposiums, group study sessions, and plans, can also contribute to the decision-making propriety and strengthen legitimacy. Taken together, both appropriate goal orientation, i.e., service-oriented government, and appropriate methods of decision-making, i.e., learning from other appropriate actors, can increase the Chinese leadership's legitimacy.

However, Lisheng et al. (2010) have pointed out that "the way these ideas are received is filtered through cultural lenses and their attractiveness and usefulness to leaders may also be affected by path-dependencies in the local setting". Seen from an instrumental-structural perspective (cf. Simon 1957), the super-ministry model applied in SOG reforms represents an instrumental tool for increasing coordination in the fragmented and complex context generated by NPM-related reforms in the 1980s and early 1990s. By establishing integrated and coherent super-ministries, such as the Ministry of Emergency Management created in the 2018 reform, fragmentation problems are expected to be solved. However, the West's experience has shown that super-ministries suffer from a lot of problems, some of which are related to internal cultural resistance to change (Lisheng et al. 2010). Obviously, the super-ministry model is not a comprehensive solution focusing on a bigger picture, nor is it a clear success story.

It is notable that the buzzword "super-ministry" provides a new label for the old doctrine of coordination. In the sense of dissolving several former organizations and establishing a single new one, the super-ministry model represents an inter-organizational coordination mode. However, judging from the underlying logic of collective action, the coordination mode in a super-ministry is still oriented toward hierarchical coordination based on top-down command-and-control authority (cf. Pollitt and Bouckaert 2017).

Scholars have argued that coordination could be typically conceptualized as the product of hierarchies, markets, and networks (Meuleman 2008, 48; Peters 1998; Powell 1990; Thompson et al. 1991), which are inherently associated with the three different stages of government reform—that is, Old Public Administration (OPA), NPM, and post-NPM (Christensen and Laegreid 2007b). OPA is characterized by a hierarchical bureaucracy while NPM introduced

market solutions into the public sector. As asserted earlier, the idea of super-ministries was not a new phenomenon when it was introduced as a post-NPM reform in the late 1990s. In many cases, it simply creates a larger rule-driven bureaucratic organization but still suffers from the bureaucracy problems that have plagued public administration for many years. Besides, many social issues, such as government reform itself, are typically cross-sectoral and cannot be solved solely by one specialized organization, because they are "wicked issues" transcending sectors and levels (Rittel and Webber 1973). But, the post-NPM agenda has tried to expand the limits of the previous reform agenda by putting more emphasis on value-based network governance.

Structurally revisiting China's SOG reforms, the super-ministry model is never the only thing in the minds of reformers, although functional coordination is stated as a reform aim. Rather it has been accompanied by the establishment of leading groups, coordinating groups, and special committees as network arrangements across agencies, with the emphasis on horizontal, inter-organizational coordination and negotiation. These features have elements from the New Public Governance strand of studies (Osborne 2010), so one can say that the modern version of these groups is following a renewed cultural path. The potential overall in networks is that cross-agency collaboration may occur through mutual communication and trust, undermining the traditional pillars or stovepipes of public organizations (Fountain 2013), which is more likely in a one-party state if the elites are homogeneous and tightly knit.

Instrumentally, the cross-ministerial networks, like leading groups, coordinating groups, or special committees, are by their nature a combination of horizontal coordination and negotiation, since they can turn proposals into solutions in a way that would be impossible in an inflexible hierarchical organizational structure that lacks the capability to co-ordinate tasks and considerations from different organizational units (Peters 1998). In many cases, the leadership will adopt a leading group's or a coordinating group's recommendation with little or no modifications, which makes these cross-ministerial networks potentially more powerful than other ministries and departments, including the super-ministries. As a consequence, these cross-ministerial networks "make" reform decisions, often through negotiations, while ministries and departments merely "implement" them. In this sense, the cross-ministerial networks can be regarded as an innovative response to the potential disadvantage of the super-ministry model (cf. Fountain 1998). Going one step further toward the underlying logic of collective action, it could be argued that the super-ministry model is based on hierarchical coordination following from top-down command-and-control. By contrast, loosely coupled structures may "facilitate innovative behavior, flexible responses, and extensive policy dynamics" (Christensen and Laegreid 2007b, 32) and thus can supplement and constrain hierarchical coordination via horizontal coordination and negotiation.

Summing up, in the interplay between hierarchical and negotiational, horizontal and vertical coordination, we see that SOG reforms are informed by an unambiguous means-end knowledge; the hierarchical super-ministry model and the negotiational cross-ministerial networks try to work together to fulfill the same end, i.e., building SOG.

At the same time, cultural-value features of post-NPM are also evident in China's SOG reforms. Seen in terms of the worldwide reform wave, while top-down hierarchical values were the main concern of OPA and one-dimensional economic values were the main concern of NPM, ethics management and value-based governance beyond hierarchical and economic values have been debated as core features of emerging post-NPM since the late 1990s (OECD 2000). In China, as mentioned above, besides the "core socialist values", the SOG-specific values statement comprises "cleanness, efficiency, satisfaction and service" according to Hu's 2012 report, and indeed, SOG reforms also cater to business in quite different structural solutions, such as super-ministries, leading groups (e.g., the Leading Group for the Reform of the Administrative Examination and Approval System), and one-stop shops. Thus, it could be argued that the "service" in the term "service-oriented government" means more pluralistic and broader values rather than just specific instrumental service delivery based on one-sided economic values. In this

respect, the SOG approach differs from NPM but shares similarities with post-NPM in value governance.

In short, our analysis has shown that China's SOG approach indeed represents a combination of structural, cultural, and symbolic features of post-NPM, that is, a dual orientation of service value and coordination action controlled hierarchically. In reality, however, this development in China does not really constitute a clean break with the past, but rather a continuation (Christensen et al. 2008), which was partly demonstrated by Premier Li's address at a national teleconference on May 12, 2015. Premier Li pointed out that "the first task this government undertook after taking office was to advance administrative reform and transform government functions, the first moves being streamlining the administration, delegating power, and strengthening regulation" (Li 2015). Considering that these reform measures of streamlining the administration and delegating power represent typical NPM features, it seems fair to say that the SOG approach in China is complex and hybrid and combines old and new elements.

However, the question is whether it is useful to analyze China in terms of the Western reform paradigm (Christensen and Fan 2018). From a comparative perspective, a main difference between China and the West is the ruling party's role in government reform. In China, a common feature of government reform is that the Party leadership takes the reform initiative and controls the reform process. Unlike in the West, political neutrality is not relevant in China's administrative system. China is governed by the single ruling party, the CPC, and its political-administrative system reforms are directly influenced by the Party's decisions. In this political context, launching a new round of government reform is a necessity for the newly elected leadership to consolidate central power and bring the situation under control. That is to say, the political will of the CPC can decisively influence China's government reform (Ma and Christensen 2018). Actually, as shown earlier, these three rounds of SOG reforms were all launched after the reform plans were first approved by the CPC Central Committee. Particularly in the 2018 reform, a number of organizational changes were introduced in the party-state apparatus involving the reassertion of the Party's leadership over the government.

Now coming back to the question raised by Christensen and Fan (2018), one answer may be how we see reality is to a large extent determined by the theoretical lens we use. In this article, the reform development lens we use to analyze China's SOG reforms is basically the Western three-stage framework of "OPA, NPM, and post-NPM". By contrast, in empirically analyzing the reality of SOG reform and normatively guided reform practice, the emerging Chinese academic school of activism advocates a three-stage historical transformation from "rule-oriented government, to management-oriented government, and then to service-oriented government" (Kangzhi 2012).

Conclusions

Although it might be argued that the strength of globalization would make reform models around the world converge, this has never fully been the case either internationally or in China. As stated in this article and elsewhere (Pearson 2007), the domestic context strongly shapes the approach taken to government reform in reality. This article has examined primarily how China's SOG reforms were initiated and carried out in post-NPM terms from three theoretical perspectives—mythical, instrumental, and cultural—and asked what the specifically Chinese characteristics are. We argue that as a basic reform myth, "service-oriented government" has been used in China's government reform not only in the sense of symbolically increasing legitimacy, but also in both structural and cultural terms (cf. Olsen 1992).

Concerning the background to the SOG-related reforms, there are unambiguous path-dependent features at work. Academics coined the concept of SOG, used later by the political leadership.

Local governments experimented with SOG features, later used by the central government, which is not that uncommon (Christensen and Fan 2018).

Mythically, SOG as a meta-structural element was selected largely because it is compatible with the Party's commitment to serving the people, so as to attain legitimacy by talking and acting in certain ways. At the same time, structurally and culturally, elements of both main components of SOG were borrowed in part from the West, in particular the idea of the super-ministry (Lisheng et al. 2010).

Seen from an instrumental-structural perspective, the super-ministry model and the cross-ministerial networks in SOG reforms, including leading groups, coordinating groups, and special committees are typical post-NPM features in the sense that they are designed to improve coordination. Specifically, the super-ministry model focuses on turning inter-organizational coordination into intra-organizational coordination, but its underlying logic of collective action is a hierarchical variant based on top-down command-and-control, reflecting the typical one-party state. By contrast, network arrangements put more emphasis on inter-organizational coordination, the underlying logic of which is a negotiational variant (March and Olsen 1983). From the cultural-value point of view, China's SOG reforms are marked by service value orientation based on ethical considerations, sharing similarities with post-NPM in value governance.

The SOG approach emerged in China in the late 1990s at the same time that post-NPM emerged in the West. However, the SOG reform trend is not a one-dimensional tendency toward post-NPM in all respects. As Premier Li (2015) said, "Our overall goal of deepening administrative reform and transforming government functions is to streamline the administration and delegate power, to combine power delegation with effective oversight and improve service all in a coordinated way". In fact, SOG in reality is a complex and hybrid pattern combining reform elements borrowed from the West, whether OPA, NPM or post-NPM, with its own traditional political-administrative system. In such a process, the Chinese context will determine what fits and hence what works, both structurally and culturally (cf. Westney 1987).

What, then, is typically Chinese about the reform processes analyzed in this article? One structural feature is the leading groups (coordinating groups or special committees), loosely coupled coordinating mechanisms that improve coordination across ministries and departments in the Party and the government, and strengthen the Party's leadership over the government. We don't argue that these features are uniquely Chinese, but that these network structures works differently in a one-party state.

Indeed, the government landscape in China has been greatly altered in the instrumental-structural sense via the super-ministry model and the cross-ministerial networks, resulting in a complex and hybrid pattern. However, while it is relatively easy to change organizational structures and grant rights to new organizations, it is definitely harder to take such rights away from former organizations that once asserted substantial control and have ongoing interests (Pearson 2007); there is cultural resistance, in other words. Furthermore, the establishment of SOG is still under way. Thus, for the moment it would seem hard to identify the Chinese characteristics of SOG in the cultural-value sense. Nevertheless, the fundamental Chinese characteristic is the so-called socialist administrative system in which the Party leads both government reform and major work in all areas via instrumental and cultural tools. The typically Western element of the political/administrative dichotomy has never been present in China's government reform.

Notes

1. There is still a scholarly debate as to whether China's government reforms in the 1980s and 1990s are variations of NPM (Yang 2007). In this article, we view China's government reforms in 1980s and 1990s more as NPM-related reforms rather than NPM reforms. See Yang Kaifeng. 2007. China's 1998 Administrative Reform and New Public Management: Applying a Comparative Framework. *International Journal of Public Administration* 30 (12–14): 1371–1392.

2. In an interview with Southern Metropolitan News in 2008, Zheng Xinli, Deputy Director of the CPC Central Policy Research Office, said that the 2008 reform was just one step of an overall administrative reform program to be implemented in the next 12 years (Lisheng et al. 2010). Southern Metropolitan News. Available from http://news.hexun.com/2008-03-12/104381782.html. (in Chinese)

3. In public management, the Chinese school of activism is a new academic school that emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s, specializing in service-oriented government and cooperative governance. See Zhang Kangzhi 2014. *The Activism of Public Administration.* (in Chinese)

4. During an era marked by democratic governance, public administration is developed for the purpose of enabling citizens to influence the government through their political representatives. In the West, democratic governance has been challenged by an NPM-inspired system, marked by market thinking and market ideology, the government begins to define its customers. Of course, from the late 20th century, there emerge many new theories and public sector reforms inspired by these theories, including NPM and post-NPM reforms.

   By contrast, in Chinese academia, the school of activism argues that democratic ideals in the West are implemented in a core-periphery structure of the governance system, thus covering up the control by the bureaucracy. Instead they use cooperative governance to mean a multisector governance system in which no one sector has a monopoly on social governance and public service delivery, although government plays an important role. Furthermore, the government in the cooperative governance system should be service-oriented. See Zhang Kangzhi. 2012. Cooperative Governance: The Destination of Social Governance Reform. *Social Science Research*, (3): 35-42. (in Chinese)

5. A general office is a leading group's standing body. Normally, a general office has dedicated office space and organizes much of the actual work for its leading group.

6. In Jiang's 2002 report, social management, a China-specific concept, was mentioned as more narrowly an aspect of maintaining public order. See Frank N. Pieke. 2012. The Communist Party and Social Management in China. *China Information* 26 (2): 149–165.

7. See http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2015/content_2856654.htm. (in Chinese)

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