The Communist Party and Social Management in China

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Abstract

At the core of China’s rise lies the Chinese Communist Party’s ability to reinvent itself and its administration. This article will investigate one aspect of the gradual overhaul of administrative institutions, processes and strategies, namely the increasing prominence of neoliberal ideas emanating from the discipline of public management in the emphasis on ‘social management’ (社会管理) in government rhetoric and planning. The article will conclude that social management may ultimately entail a corporatist re-engineering of Chinese society that that allows both a considerable degree of pluralism while strengthening the leading role of the party over society.
Neo-socialism

The Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) rebuilding of the socialist party-state in the past twenty years is at the centre of the epochal transformation of China into a modern, capitalist society and global presence. In China socialist governance and a capitalist economy are now locked in a symbiotic relationship. Authoritarian socialism as a form of practical government has made capitalism possible, while the future of socialist rule is predicated on the continued success of capitalist development. More than thirty years of ‘reform and opening up’ have allowed the party-state to reinvent itself, putting the rule of the CCP on an increasingly solid footing. Several decades of unprecedented state-building are beginning to have a fundamental impact on the technologies, rationality and objectives of government.

Currently, the presence of government in Chinese society is different from what it has ever been. It is both more powerful and resourceful and less direct and invasive. At the same time, China’s globalization has had profound repercussions both inside and outside China itself. From a hermetically sealed socialist state, the country has evolved to become an increasingly cosmopolitan one, especially in the coastal region. Gone are the days of closed work units, neighbourhoods and villages as the foundation of governance. China’s society has become much more complex and fluid. High levels of social, occupational and residential mobility, social and economic stratification, and cultural, religious and social diversity are setting fundamentally different challenges to government and civil society.

At the core of the CCP’s strategy lies the fact that it is prepared to reinvent itself, while retaining core Leninist principles that guarantee its authoritarian leading role over state and society. The Party summarizes this orientation by saying that it is a ‘Marxist learning party’ (马克思主义学习
型政党). For many years now, Chinese leaders, administrators, academics and businesspeople have mined societies of the developed world (above all the United States) for clues, ideas and models – many of them ‘neoliberal’ – that may help make China a better place. These are blended with indigenous socialist and reinvented traditionally Chinese ideas and practices. From a Chinese perspective, state building thus resembles a process of selective borrowing and mixing, producing a unique and evolving governmental rationality that I call neo-socialism.²

Socialism continues to be a crucial part of the party-state’s ongoing quest to reproduce and reinvent itself; without it, the party’s rule would be nothing more than another form of authoritarianism. The party’s survival is predicated on its Leninist charisma which in turn needs ideologically prescribed goals. In other words, the key to the party’s ability to renew itself and its ‘organizational charisma’³ is its skill to redefine its mission to change China. Under neo-socialism, the communist utopia has been replaced by a technocratic objective of a strong, peaceful and modern China that is almost synonymous with strong, effective and forward-looking government. Socialist ideology is no longer the end served by communist party rule, but the mere means by which party rule is perpetuated. Ideology has become an aspect not of politics, but of public administration. Ideology is an indispensible aspect in the creation of regime support, intending to generate no longer ‘belief’ in the party, but to cultivate responsible, trusting and ‘high-quality’ citizens who inhabit an active, autonomous and governable society.⁴

An intrinsic part of neo-socialist strategy has been the selective, partial and gradual nature of the marketization of state and collective assets and functions. Gradually, markets have been created for a vast range of commodities, resources and services, including labour, capital, insurance, housing, education, health care and land. In none of these cases has the state fully retreated from the markets its own policies have created, retaining a larger or smaller role for governments, state
agencies, or state-owned enterprises as providers, regulators and quite often also as major
stakeholders. As I have shown in my recent work on party schools and cadre training,\(^5\) competitive markets also have been created at the very core of the party-state’s Leninist legacy, such as the training and recruitment of officials. Neo-socialism thus entails more than an old-fashioned Leninist party that puts neoliberal technologies to familiar uses. Under neo-socialism, innovative neoliberal and home-grown governmental technologies cut right at the heart of the party-state itself, serving to support, centralize, modernize and strengthen the party’s Leninist leading role in Chinese society.

In this article, I will explore the application of the concept of neo-socialism in the Party’s endeavour to establish and manage institutions at the interface of state and society. From the perspective of the party-state, state-society relations are increasingly a matter of facilitation and supervision, the object of the party-state’s ‘social management’, rather than the ‘politics’, ‘struggle’, or ‘propaganda’ of the Maoist and even the early reform periods. Since the Third Plenum of the 16\(^{th}\) Party Congress in 2004, this has become an increasingly prominent aspect of the ‘construction of a socialist harmonious society’ (构建社会主义和谐社会).\(^6\) The new Five-Year Plan for 2011-2015 even devotes a whole chapter to ‘social management’, making it a ‘key target’ (主要目标) of the government’s work and a core political concept in party discourse.\(^7\) It brings out very clearly not only the main assumptions and features, but also some of the limitations of neo-socialist governance in the context of an administrative structure that still retains many of its pre-reform characteristics. My conclusion from this discussion will be that the success of neo-socialist ideas therefore hinges on a much more radical rethink of administrative structures and objectives than hitherto has been attempted.
Under the leadership of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, CCP policy making has incorporated viewpoints and knowledge from a much broader range of sciences than just the natural sciences, engineering and economics. In the case of the discourse on social management, the influence of legal scholars and sociologists is clear to see, although direct evidence on their role remains very hard to obtain. However, in this article I will focus on the similar, but arguably even less direct impact of the new discipline of public management. Its influence has, in my view, inserted foreign neoliberal ideas on ‘new public management’ that promise the possibility of de-politicized control over the public sector beyond the realm of the state. Non-state social forces and institutions are thus presented as no longer a threat to the CCP’s power monopoly, but as the object and tool of a concerted effort at social engineering that will ultimately strengthen party rule.

I will first describe the growth and development of the discipline of public management between 1996 and 2002. I will then show how the ideas and viewpoints emanating from this new discipline in period 2005-2011 re-emerge in government discourse and policy making on social management. The analysis in this article is preliminary in the sense that it is based only on government and party documentation acquired through the internet and during earlier research on cadre training in China. The conclusions of the article should therefore not be read as final. They are hypotheses on the development of government thinking and the administrative practice of social management that will have to be tested in further fieldwork-based research in China itself.

Public administration and public management

Academic disciplines are not only a way of looking at and understanding a specific aspect of reality (say the economy, politics, or social structure); they also are centrally involved in the creation and maintenance of these aspects as separately knowable entities that can then be acted upon, managed and controlled by governing institutions. Disciplines are the product and arenas of
both academic and non-academic political agendas, debates and turf wars. The subject matter, approaches and impact of specific academic disciplines are therefore have genealogies specific to the social and political characteristics of the society in which they are embedded. This is as true in China as it elsewhere.\textsuperscript{9} For instance, philosophy, a largely purely academic discipline in the West, is in China directly relevant to policy making, because most of it is concerned with Marxism and its derivative ideologies all the way from Leninism to the ‘Three Represents’ and the harmonious society.\textsuperscript{10} The central position of philosophy is, for instance, expressed very clearly in the 2007-2010 development plan of the philosophy department of the Central Party School. The plan states that the main characteristic of contemporary Marxist philosophical research is that it leads research on the big real issues. Moreover, on the basis of their philosophical research, ‘specialists in the department will continue to give advice on policy making to the government both through their reports and internal consultation.’\textsuperscript{11}

The growth and indigenization of the new disciplines of public administration and public management progressed very rapidly in the 1990s and early 2000s. Presenting governance as more than government control over the population and endorsing the development of civil society, public administration and public management are one of the arenas where modern, neo-socialist ideas are produced and inserted into the party-state’s governmental practice. In traditional, pre-Cultural Revolution cadre training, the closest thing to administrative science was the discipline of ‘party building’ (党建). This discipline continues to exist in party schools, and still no other academic discipline in China explicitly can take the Chinese Communist Party and its role in government and administration as its object of study. By contrast, public administration (行政学, literally ‘administrative science’) and administrative management (行政管理) started out as a subject within political science, itself reinstated shortly after the start of the reforms. It developed quickly from 1984 onwards, was officially recognized as a separate discipline in 1988 and in the
1990s became a mainstream discipline not only in universities, but also in party schools and the then new schools of administration. Public administration in China focuses on the institutions, the law and the formal arrangements of government; it is allowed to study neither the formal institutions of the judiciary, representative government and the CCP, nor the compromises and deals, influence peddling and jockeying for power that constitute the messy side of politics. Furthermore, as a highly sanitized slice of political science, public administration approaches issues of governance as they appear to government officials, namely limited to questions of the government’s control over and management of society. Despite that, the growth of public administration has been an important component of the administrative reforms: by at least pretending that party and government, and politics and administration can be separated, a vision of a stable Chinese state is presented unencumbered by the factional competition, purges and campaigns that were (and to certain extent continue to be) the mainstay of party life.

However, in the latter half of the 1990s, administrative science was increasingly criticized as an anodyne enterprise ill-suited to China’s changing administrative and social reality. Inspired by Western scholarship on civil society and the public sphere and World Bank support for non-governmental organizations, scholars such as Liu Xiurui at the National School of Administration argued that administration amounted to much more than the work of government. With the growth of a market economy, a public sphere had emerged in which the government was just one of many providers. Governance, moreover, was not chiefly a matter of control over the population. The preoccupation with control, Liu argued, was something that China’s feudalism and state socialism had in common. Modern governance should aim at providing services for the population in ways that are democratically controlled by the people. As a result, China no longer needs mere public administration, but the practice and study of public management (公共管理). The argument fitted very well with the restructuring of the administration and cadre system under
the leadership of Premier Zhu Rongji from 1997 onwards. This was an important factor in the rapid ascendancy of the new discipline.\(^{13}\)

Compared to public administration, what does the discipline of public management Chinese-style do? According to an authoritative textbook authored by the Shanghai-based political scientist Zeng Jun the management of public affairs most importantly involves policy-making. Public management is principally interested how policies impact on behaviour and public projects and the functionality of the institutions of public management. Unlike public administration, the discipline is much less concerned with the details of the administrative setup and organizational adjustment of such institutions (p. 9). Public management extends its scope from the administrative apparatus of formal government to the whole public sector. This includes the legislative organs and the judiciary, state-owned enterprises and political parties, and societal organizations that are part of the ‘third sector’ (between the public and private sectors), such as service units (hospitals, schools), mass organizations, community organizations, charitable foundations, popular and professional associations, and other non-governmental and non-profit organizations. However, the discipline also recognizes the special role that the government plays in Chinese society. Government is the core and main part of the public sector and public organizations, with other organizations playing a supplementary role (p. 12). Zeng also points out that in the few years of its existence the discipline of public management has yet to develop a robust distinct identity. Western concepts are borrowed without concern for the need for adaptation to the Chinese context (本土化, ‘indigenization’). Conversely, research in public management still tends in many ways to behave as the successor discipline of public administration. Non-government organizations are often simply looked at through governmental eyes, ignoring their special character, role and functions that sets them off from governmental organizations (p. 17-18).\(^{14}\)
The introduction of public management as the future of Chinese governance illustrates a clever use of a foreign neoliberal discourse on ‘new public management’ – which in itself is an application of the language of business administration to public administration – to depoliticize calls for the development of civil society and democratization. Instead of antagonistic western impositions aimed at destabilizing the CCP, democracy and civil society are presented as intrinsic to the CCP’s own vision of a modern Chinese state and society. As Liu himself put it:

Western new public management … has drawn on the experience of business administration and the market mechanism … for the development of a movement for government reforms that emphasizes efficiency. However, [when] we [in China] talk about new public management, in addition to considerations of efficiency, we are even more concerned with questions of the public nature of management, such as democratic participation, democratic management, democratic supervision, democratic investigation and so on. This is something that we must pay attention to when establishing a system for public management in our country.\(^{15}\) (Liu Xirui 2002: 33)

Rather than antagonistic calls for democracy beyond the established administrative system, democracy here is de-politicized by its inclusion in the larger neo-socialist project of technocratic administrative reform. The fusion of technocracy and democracy may strike Westerners as odd or naive. In the Chinese context the professionalization of administration and the depoliticization of democracy both aim to limit the direct and arbitrary power of the CCP and its individual leaders over society. This incidentally is also the reason why western interpretations of Chinese administrative reforms as simply leading to the growth of a technocratic regime are missing at least part of the point. In China, the promotion of technocratic rule serves enduring and often
conflicting political agendas, such as the strengthening of CCP leadership or, conversely, grassroots democracy and the autonomy of non-state organizations.

The creation of a succession of new academic disciplines since the early eighties thus follows a logic that is both highly political and explicitly depoliticizes governance in China. What is remarkable about this is that first public administration and now public management have been so readily endorsed by the party-state. Since the turn of the century, almost all major universities and party schools in China have included public management as a core discipline. The establishment of new Master of Public Administration (MPA) programmes in the late 1990s and early 2000s is the most prominent example and important driver behind the rapid ascension of the discipline of public management. In Chinese the MPA is called Master of Public Management (公共管理硕士). The English name of these programmes retaining the word ‘administration’ has simply been copied from the practice in the US, where the MPA is modelled on the well-known Master of Business Administration (MBA) programmes. By drawing on foreign experience and China’s specific circumstances, the MPAs aspire to produce a new type of high-level managers, administrators and policy makers for state and non-state organizations who possess practical, useful and specialized skills. The MPA programmes are intended to break through the conventional barriers between existing disciplines: their training must be practical, comprehensive and strategic. The flexible structure of MPA programmes will allow students and their work units the freedom to create a programme of training tailored most to their needs.

The creation of public management and its pre-eminence over the older discipline of public administration is only partially the achievement of progressively minded scholars and their foreign supporters. It suited the party-state’s administrative reform agenda in the late 1990s and early 2000s. As a gift of the state, public management has continued to serve its ultimate master.
Paradoxically, by the mid-2000s once the Hu-Wen leadership was firmly established, the ideas on governance promoted by the discipline were enlisted to serve another, statist agenda. Rather than serve to break through the old habits and structures of the party-state, they were deployed to establish a set of new ones.

**From public management to social management**

Despite the continued importance of the discipline of public management in academic or cadre training settings, the word public management itself only rarely, if ever appears in key Central documents of the party-state. A reading of such documents nevertheless reveals the influence of the basic ideas associated with public management, in addition to those of sociology and legal studies. Governance is increasingly seen as management rather than politics involving both state and non-state institutions. However, at the hands of the party-state these originally neoliberal ideas of public management have morphed into tools of building a state that has increasingly corporatist ambitions and a fixation on social stability and security.

The key word here is ‘social management’ (社会管理). In the 12th five-year plan published in March 2011 this concept was elevated to one of the eight ‘key targets’ of the plan. It included public service, democracy and legal system, a ‘social management system for greater social harmony’ and the use of volunteers. Despite its rather sudden prominence, the concept in its current, inclusive meaning goes back at least to 2005, and was already briefly mentioned in Jiang Zemin’s final report as CCP general secretary to the 16th Party Congress in 2002 as more narrowly an aspect of maintaining public order. As we will see below, the public order reading of the word remains important, despite its apparent contradiction with the much more inclusive and tolerant aspects added by the Hu-Wen regime. In policy documents both meanings occur
together, including in the 12th Five-Year Plan, revealing that techniques of governance borrowed from public management (and sociology and legal studies) ultimately are simply an aspect of (or perhaps even a later addition to) an enduring agenda of social stability and public security.

At a study session of the CCP Politburo on administrative reform and the economic legal system on 21 October 2005, General Secretary Hu Jintao opened the proceedings with a few observations on the role and function of public administration. With the growth of a socialist market economy, Hu said, the main functions of the government have become economic regulation, market regulation, social management and public service. These government functions, he added, will have to be carried out strictly according to the law. The earlier aspiration of the party and government to manage all of the economy and society according to the plan was neither feasible nor desirable anymore. But for the government just to manage the economy, like Hu Jintao’s predecessor Jiang Zemin had done, was not enough. It had led to widespread social dislocation and unrest that directly threatened (and continued to threaten) social stability. Society had to be managed in order to uphold social stability, but the law would have to play a key role in providing the framework and ground rules. Management of society included guiding and shaping autonomous mechanisms that help the government resolve the tensions, conflicts and dislocations caused by the market economy, supplemented by the modernization of more conventional law and order approaches to unrest, crime and disorder. To the leaders of the Chinese party-state social management had become a vital government task and part of the project to establish a harmonious society in a scientific fashion.

On this occasion Hu did not elaborate on how exactly social management would deliver the desired harmonious society. However, earlier in 2005, in an elaboration on the Decision of the Fourth Plenum of the 16th Central Committee in November 2004, he had commented on the place
of social management in the overall strategy for the strengthening of party leadership and government:

[w]e should give full play to the role of grass-roots party organizations and party members in serving the people and [promoting] cohesion among the people. We should bring into play the role of urban and rural self-ruling grass-roots organizations in the coordination of interests and the resolution of contradictions and problems. … Governments at all levels should further improve social management and public services, and improve the quality of public services. They should improve the ability and level of the management of society according to the law. Governments should promote the interconnection … and complementarity of government administrative functions with social self-administration … to create an effective coverage and complete management setup for society. [They] must strengthen urban and rural grassroots organizations and make a start with constructing harmonious communities to assist in the improvement of living standards and quality. [They] must play a bridging role in the close relationship of party and government with the people, and [they] must play a facilitating role in upholding social stability and in creating a favourable environment for the people to live and work in peace and happiness.²¹

Social management in this early explanation involves a state corporatist strategy in which local party, government, autonomous organizations and the people work together. The main focus of this effort should be the construction of communities (社区) – at that time still quite new – that are both the lowest level of formal government and self-governing organizations of local residents.²² Social management here, in fact, is very close to and, I would suggest, borrowed from the main ideas promoted by public management scholarship discussed in the previous section.
Social management and public management include governance beyond the limits of the formal administration. Social management adds to this a proactive agenda for the creation of institutions and mechanisms of a non-state public sector compatible with the needs and vision of the CCP. Social management thus combines two seemingly incompatible things: a neoliberal emphasis on the autonomy of the public sector borrowed from public management and a continued Leninist emphasis on the leading role of the party and government. In the remainder of this article we will explore the nature and possible implications of this paradox.

**Social management and corporatist rule**

Continued Leninist rule in China has not necessarily entailed simply suppression of the public sector, although individuals, organizations, or ideas deemed a direct threat to the Party are of course persecuted, and often very harshly. However, more common is that Leninist social management constraints the autonomy of the public sector through a deliberate depoliticization of conflicts of opinion or interests. These are not given unfettered room for expression in the policy-making process, but in classic corporatist fashion are managed by the party-state to prevent them from doing harm to the organic harmony of society. Corporatism is based on the assumption of class harmony and organic unity of society. Segments and institutions of society have a right to act autonomously, but also have the duty to maintain social discipline to safeguard the needs and interests of the nation-state as a whole. Although corporatism is often associated with fascism and Nazism, it continues to feature explicitly or implicitly in political discourse and practice in many different nation-states, including many liberal democracies.

The concept of corporatism does not feature very much in discussions on the current changes in the Chinese party-state and society. In the early 1990s Jonathan Unger and Anita Chan published an article that pioneered the usefulness of the concept to the understanding of the state’s
relationship with the many professional and other associations that had started to emerge in China. At the time, however, the debate was mainly over whether such associations could be seen as the sprouts of a semi-independent civil society in China, the exact opposite therefore of what Unger and Chan tried to argue. Around the same time Jean Oi much more successfully proposed the concept of local state corporatism to describe the local state’s involvement in business. Despite appearances, the concept of local state corporatism describes something very different from what this article is about. The term ‘local state corporatism’ is grounded in the metaphor of the local state as a *business corporation*. Social management discussed here is akin to ‘classic’ corporatism that is based on the image of society as an integrated and coordinated *corporate body*.

Absent from this early vision of Hu Jintao is the coercive side of social management to keep non-harmonious expressions of dissatisfaction in check. This, as we have seen, had been the main focus of Hu Jintao’s predecessor Jiang Zemin. Yet social management as the maintenance of public order would soon resurface. The development of social management in subsequent years was mainly left to Zhou Yongkang, until 2007 minister of public security, after which he was elevated to the CCP’s most powerful body, the Politburo Standing Committee, where his responsibilities include the oversight of public security affairs.

**Social management and social order**

In 2006, immediately after the Sixth Plenum of the 16th Central Committee in October of that year, Zhou published an article in the *People’s Daily* ‘Strengthen and improve social management – promote social stability and harmony.’ Zhou started with the observation that the decision of the Sixth Plenum has established strengthening and improving social management as a historical duty, and then proceeded to give a detailed outline of the tasks ahead. The party and government face
momentous changes in China’s social structure that involve new social contradictions and
differences of interest (literally ‘pattern of interests’,利益格局). Only by strengthening and
improving social management can these interests be planned as a whole and coordinated and thus
social contradictions resolved, social stability and order guaranteed, and the social base of the rule
of the party consolidated.

Zhou observes that the problems that exist with conflicts of interest between different social
groups and strata in society have been caused by the fact that administrative reform has lagged
behind economic development. Unlike in the earlier pronouncements of Hu Jintao, social
management becomes a catch-all solution for all kinds of issues that have to do with social
stability. Included is for instance the general promotion of fairness: more even economic
development across China, access to education and health care, and resolutions to environmental
degradation. Strengthening of government according to the law, self-government and public
participation and public service are mentioned repeatedly. But Zhou also gives equally much
prominence to an ‘equal emphasis on prevention and rapid response’ in resolving both ‘ordinary
and extraordinary social contradictions.’ His call for a combined central and local, territory-based
emergency management system with a unified command that can effectively respond to disasters,
accidents and security incidents has been echoed in several other Central policy documents since.
However, Zhou also goes into detail regarding what presumably are the more ‘ordinary’ ways to
maintain social stability. These include mechanisms for the expression of demands and opinions,
conflict mediation and resolution and what he terms ‘normal mechanisms for striking hard’
against crime, including reforms to the judicial system.

In Zhou’s article, social management comes across as an awkward combination of a long-term
vision of the engineering of whole new society with the management of the normal problems and
crises that are just a normal part of the job for China’s top-policeman. Zhou’s final paragraph on what he terms the ‘weak links in upholding social stability’ brings this out very clearly. One of these weak links is the fact that in China more and more people have changed from ‘work unit people’ (单位人) to ‘social people’ (社会人). The long-term project of the construction of self-managing communities is seen as the way to deal with that. Other weak links seem of an altogether different order, such as management of the floating population and foreign visitors and residents, education of homeless children and the children of prison inmates, rehabilitation of drug addicts, the reduction of crime and, finally, the management of the Internet.

Zhou’s article still is some way off from a coherent and internally consistent policy statement. It clearly caters for several different political agendas, such as upholding the rule of law, strengthening grassroots democracy and civil society, improving public security and social stability, and a more general desire to build the party and the state. These contradictions have not prevented the Chinese leadership from sticking with the idea of social management and, as said at the start of this article, in the 2011 Five-Year Plan social management has been put right at the centre of the government’s tasks. The whole of part 9 (out of a total of 16 parts) of the plan is devoted to social management, which starts with the by now familiar observations on the changes that require new ways of managing Chinese society to ensure social vitality, harmony and stability that are based on the principles of multi-stakeholder involvement, corporate governance, an integrated approach and dynamic coordination. Social management mechanisms ought to be based on the central role of party and government and should be a combination of communication and consultation with an emergency control to solve people’s legitimate complaints and resolve social tensions.
After these general observations, a range of more concrete aspects and measures are discussed. These include developing and improving urban and rural communities that are self-governing, democratically managed according to the law and that involve community service, public welfare and mutual aid through home-owners committees, property management agencies, volunteer participation and other local organizations. Communities also should deliver a range of local government functions and services, including population control, employment, social security, civil affairs, health, culture, social stability and petitions. In addition, autonomous social organizations should further be developed, their internal governance structure improved, and strictly managed according to the law. Rights, interests and property of people should be guaranteed. Conflict mediation, complaints and public opinion expression should all be improved, including through the internet.

However, just as in Zhou’s article more than five years earlier, the rub comes with what happens if all of this fails to deliver the social stability that remains the overriding concern. Social management then simply translates into the improvement of public security work, an aspect that the five-year plan develops in considerable detail. By no means is all of this simple policing, and the party clearly has learned from some of the problems and scandals of the recent past with poisonous baby formula, counterfeit foodstuffs and medical drugs, and collapsing buildings. Food and drug safety, for example, features prominently, as do safety and working conditions at work and quality and safety standards in construction. However, the idea of an emergency response system, already around for several years, is developed here much further as one of the main pillars of social management and upholding social stability. Again, a specialized and professional rapid response system with a unified command structure is promised that can deal with disasters, social upheavals and other crises. Such a rapid response setup ought to have a core of specialized forces to which are added a backbone and assault force of the police, armed police and army. They are supposed to be supplemented by forces from expert teams, enterprises and volunteers in
cracking down on emergencies, strengthening prevention of disasters and social unrest and beefing up law enforcement. Law enforcement includes an extremely wide range of measures that include community policing and ‘comprehensive management of social order’, a national population database and intelligence and information gathering, in addition to aid, assistance, education and medical work, and the general improvement of public order.  

Within the discursive space created with the concept of social management many political agendas and images of China’s future compete with each other. These include ruling China according to the law, strengthening and modernizing public and national security, developing a non-state, self-governing public sector, the retreat of the state from society and the economy, the strengthening and centralization of the state, and the promotion of the party as the pivot of the nation. Social management in contemporary China is therefore many different things, whose common denominator is the corporatist idea that the interests of society ought to override those of any group, segment, organization, or class. The state as the representative of the collective will of society is tasked with upholding unity and social harmony, either voluntary and through consultation or, if that fails, by force. Social management is therefore somewhat of a magic wand, the cure to the many ills that still plague Chinese society and government, and includes even repeated references to social management as a way to ensure the ‘people’s livelihood’ (民生), an vague and paternalistic concept favoured by the ‘father’ of the Chinese nation Sun Yat-Sen a hundred years ago. Yet we are well-advised not to underestimate the discourse of social management that since 2005 has rapidly become a major aspect of the CCP’s pursuit of a harmonious society, and is set to be developed further in the years to come.

Conclusion
In a little over ten years, the CCP and its neo-socialist project have travelled far. Borrowing from social science disciplines such as legal studies, sociology and – as discussed in more detail here – public management, new ideas regarding the rule of law, strengthening of the non-state public sector, social security and fairness and the retreat of the state have been firmly co-opted into a statist corporatist strategy to strengthen and professionalize the rule of the party in line with the requirements of a rapidly developing capitalist economy and society. Social management has been the catch-all phrase under which a variety of ideas and measures have been brought together – regardless of their mutual inconsistency and possible incompatibility – to serve a more important end: upholding social stability.

Perhaps the best way to capture this effort is the word social engineering. The CCP’s faith in social management reveals not only its pre-occupation with upholding stability, but also its belief that society can indeed be made into anything you want it to be. Social management is likely to become an increasingly prominent part of the party’s neo-socialist project, entailing a corporatist re-engineering of Chinese society. Through the application of selected neoliberal ideas the party allows both a considerable degree of pluralism, while simultaneously modernizing and strengthening its leading role over society. Viewed from this angle, whether or not China will become a police state or whether communist dictatorship has managed definitively to squash any hopes of democratization and human rights are perhaps not the most important issues. The question really is whether the CCP will indeed manage fully to shape Chinese society according its own bland blueprint of a happy, prosperous and harmonious society. That future might still seem to be very far away, judging from the many persistent problems and issues remaining in Chinese society and the party’s rule. But, is it really?

Notes

See Pieke 2009 for a longer discussion of the term neo-socialism and why I prefer it over alternatives, such as neo-Leninism.


The first part of this section of the article is adapted from chapter 4 of my book on cadre training and party schools in China (Pieke, *The good communist: elite training and state building in today's China*.). References to interviews contained in this section refer to the research for this book conducted in Yunnan and Beijing between 2004 and 2007.

This observation should not be confused with the ‘indigenization’ (本土化) of disciplines, an issue that is often hotly debated in China and that I discuss briefly below. Deliberate attempts at indigenization are merely a small part of the specific genealogies that disciplines in China follow. On the indigenization of my
own discipline, anthropology, see Xu Jieshun, ed. *Bentuhua: renleixue de da qushi* (Nativization: the
article “Bentuhua: Zhongguo renleixue zhuiqiu xin de guanlian yu pingdeng de celüe” (Indigenization: a
Zhenglai (邓正来) at Fudan University (复旦大学) has written more generally on the indigenization of
social sciences in China; see his book *Yanjiu yu fansi: Zhongguo shehui kexue zizhuxing de sikao*
(Research and reflection: autonomous thinking of Chinese social sciences), expanded edition, Beijing: Zhongguo
Zheng-fa Daxue Chubanshe, 2004. I am grateful to one of China Information’s reviewers for pointing me
to his work.

10 As a 19th century thinker working in an environment in which the modern social sciences were only in
their earliest infancy, Marx first and foremost thought of himself as a philosopher.

11 Zhongyang dangxiao zhexue jiaoyanbu (Philosophy department of the Central Party School), Makesi
zhuyi zhexue guojia zhongdian xueke jianshe yu fazhan guihua (2007-2010) (Construction of national
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12 Huang Da-qiang, Teaching administrative science, in Miriam K. Mills and Stuart S. Nagel (eds) *Public

13 Interview 91, 26 April 2007, and Liu Xirui, Fazhan gonggong guanli tizhi shi woguo de biran xuanze
(Developing the system for public management is a necessary choice for our country), *Gonggong
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14 Zeng Jun, *Gonggong guanli xinlun: tixi, jiazhi yu gongju* (New introduction to public management:
*system, values and tools*), Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2006.

15 Liu Xirui, Fazhan gonggong guanli tizhi shi woguo de biran xuanze (Developing the system for public
management is a necessary choice for our country), p. 33.


‘We must combine punishment and prevention, with emphasis on the latter, take comprehensive measures to maintain law and order and improve social management so as to keep public order’, Jiang Zemin, Build a well-off society in an all-round way and create a new situation in building socialism with Chinese characteristics, report at the 16th Party Congress, 8 November 2002, http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200211/18/eng20021118_106985.shtml, accessed 17 June 2011.

Hu Jintao, Tuijin xingzheng guanli tizhi gaige jiakuai zhuanbian zhengfu zhineng (Speed up the reform of the administrative system to promote the transformation of government functions), summary of speech at the 27th collective study session of the CCP Politburo, 21 October 2005, Zhonggong zhongyang zhengzhiju jiti xuexi neirong zhaiyao (Summary of the content of the collective study session of the CCP Politburo), 2d volume, 28 March 2007, no place, no publisher, pp. 409-410. The connection between this study session in 2005 and the subsequently rising prominence of social management was made in an article in the Study Times, the newspaper of the Central Party School, written by Ma Huaide who had been one of the academic presenters at the 2005 session. See Ma Huaide, ‘Yifa xingzheng shi jiaqiang he chuangxin shehui guanli de guanjian’ (The key to strengthening and innovating social management is administration according to the law), Xuexi Shibao 6 April 2011, online at http://theory.people.com.cn/GB/14323444.html, accessed 6 April 2011. Ma emphasizes in particular the importance given to the law in social management and administrative reform during the 2005 session, a message that may have gotten at least partially lost in
subsequent years. On the Politburo’s collective study sessions, see Pieke, *The good communist: Elite training and state building in today’s China*, p. 69, and Yiyi Lu, *The collective study sessions of the Politburo: a multipurpose tool of China’s central leadership*, Nottingham: China Policy Institute Briefing Series Issue No. 27.


23 One aspect of this effort that is uniquely neo-socialist is creation or strengthening of the CCP’s own grass-roots party branches, including in private and foreign enterprises, NGOs and charitable organizations. On this point, see Patricia Thurston’s forthcoming article in *The China Journal* “.”


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