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Central government agencies in China: toward a research agenda

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Abstract
Central government agencies play key roles in making and implementing public policies in China, but the empirical studies on these organisations are disproportionately scarce. Scholars in political science and public administration predominantly focus their researches on local governments at various levels, while paying little, if any, attention to the central counterparts. This article discusses the phenomenon of strong local but weak central government research pattern (the so called ‘central–local research divide’), and identifies the driving forces behind this research gap. It also introduces the lessons and implications from the US and European research projects for developing, replicating, and extending central agency databases. The research further elaborates the existing variables and data sources on central agencies and develops the China Central Agency Database (CCAD) to advance the quantitative research of central agencies in China. Finally, a conclusion is drawn with a research agenda to encourage researchers to coproduce the CCAD and embrace the study of central agencies.

Introduction
China as a huge and unitary state is hierarchically structured, with the central government playing a pivotal role in shaping and orienting nationwide public policies (Huang 1996). Although much administrative and fiscal power has been delegated to local governments over the past two decades (Landry 2008), the control of the central government over local authorities has not been weakened but rather been substantially strengthened. For instance, the central government has increasingly centralised regulatory agencies via ‘centralised management’ (chuizhi guanli) to address alarming local protectionism and rampant corruption (Mertha 2005). The tax-sharing reform introduced in 1994 has substantially strengthened the resource redistribution and bargaining power of the central government, since local governments largely rely on central fiscal transfer to cover their alarming budgetary deficits (Wang and Ma 2014). Local governments fall over each other to please central ministries to strive for scarce fiscal...
resources and preferential policies. Many local governments establish liaison offices in Beijing to lobby ministries and ‘seek money from ministries’ (paobu qianjin) (He 2000). In other words, the pivotal role of central agencies in China’s political landscape should not be underestimated.

The spectacular importance and extensive influences of central agencies (i.e. ministries, commissions and offices) in policy making and implementation might have attracted numerous academic studies in political and administrative sciences. The reality is, however, that much less studies have been devoted to central agencies than their local counterparts at various levels. Although central agencies are crucial in political and administrative decision-making in China, we find scarce literature devoted to their operations and behaviours. Scholars pay almost all of their energies and intelligence in local government studies, whereas few of them seriously examine the central counterparts. If we cannot fully understand the characteristics and processes of central agencies, our modelling of central–local interaction would be largely distorted and far away from the reality (Blanchard and Shleifer 2001). It seems that many scholars take the absence of central agencies in the literature as granted, and the central–local divide in political and administrative researches has not yet been seriously examined. In the study of central–local relations, scholars predominantly focus on the local side, while the central side is usually presumed without any empirical verification. Why scholars do not study central agencies in China? What can we do to fill the void in the extant literature?

Scholars are not uninterested in the central government. However, their explorations are largely impeded by the institutional constraints to access empirical materials and the lack of usable data at their disposal. The grapevines about central government decision-making and leadership succession are lively exchanged and discussed among political and administrative scientists, but they are often frustrated by the mountainous challenges encountered in unmasking the secrecy and mysteries of these superior organisations. The advancement of open government initiatives and the enlargement of third-party evaluations, however, have remarkably transformed this situation, with increasingly richer data available at hand. It is the time to bring back and rediscover the central government in our studies.

In this article, I discuss the importance of central agencies in explaining political and administrative operations in China, and identify key avenues in central agency research. I first map the representation of China’s central agencies in the literature, and compare it with that of the international community, particularly the cases of the US and European countries. I then interpret the absence of central agencies in China’s political and administrative sciences. The research further elaborates the existing variables and data sources on central agencies, and presents a proposal to develop the China Central Agency Database (CCAD). The recommendations to fill the research gap are elaborated in the discussion of open government initiatives. Finally a conclusion with suggestions on the future direction in China’s central agency research is drawn.

The central–local divide in political and administrative sciences

It is not an easy task to position the relative proportion of central agency in political and administrative sciences. Federal or central government is counted as a topic or
theme in contrast to state and local government in some reviews (Terry 2005; Raadschelders and Lee 2011; Perry and Kraemer 1986), while it is considered as a unit of analysis or data source in other review articles (Walker, Brewer, and Choi 2014; Wu, He, and Sun 2013; Pitts 2007). This research relies on the previous methodological review to identify the studies of central agency relative to state and local governments. We also run a preliminary literature search to help us understand the central–local divide in government research.

**Central agency research in the international community**

The narrow attention scholars pay on each level of government in the political and administrative sciences can be found in the review articles published in *Public Administration Review* (PAR), the flagship journal in the field of Public Administration.1 Perry and Kraemer’s (1986) review of 287 PAR articles published from 1975 to 1984 finds four federal government studies, accounting for roughly 0.7%. This proportion is comparable to the number of the articles on urban and regional governments (four articles accounting for 1.4%) and state government (two articles accounting for 0.7%) (Perry and Kraemer 1986). An analysis of 350 articles published in PAR from 2000 to 2005 reveals that there are eight articles on federal government and eleven on local government among over 30 topics, accounting for 2.3 and 3.1%, respectively (Terry 2005). These results imply that researchers pay equivalent attention on federal, state and local government agencies in their studies.

The presence of each government tier may be underestimated in the above analyses, because other themes or topics (e.g. human resource management or budget) may draw on data from various levels and types of governments. It is much more pertinent to compare the proportion of each level of government in terms of research focus or data source. A content analysis of 188 empirical researches presented in three Public Management Research Conferences (2001, 2003 and 2005) finds that 54 articles (29.7%) examined local government organisations (counties, cities and towns), followed by 50 articles on federal government (27.5%) and 41 pieces on state government (22.5%) (Pitts 2007).2 In other words, Pitts’ (2007) analysis suggests that approximately one third of researches focusses on or collects data from federal government organisations.

To further illuminate the equivalence of federal, state and local governments in the international community, this research runs a preliminary literature search in the Web of Science. I narrow the coverage to journals indexed by the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) and the publication period from 2000 to 2013. I select the topic-search approach, and only journal articles are included (excluding reviews and other document types). The results show that ~44% of articles are about federal and central governments, slightly lower than that of local governments at ~48% (see Table 1). Subnational governments (e.g. states and provinces) are relatively less examined, with only 8% of articles published. The share of articles at the three government levels has been very stable over the research period, although the total amount of articles grew rapidly and was roughly tripled from 385 in 2000 to 944 in 2013.

The above discussions suggest that federal and central government agencies receive equal scholarly attention with agencies at lower levels (e.g. state and local
governments) from political and administrative researchers in the international community. There are tremendous data and literature on central and federal agencies generated for scholars to explore, and the publications indeed dig deeply to depict the dynamics and processes of these agencies at the apex of hierarchy.

The study of central agencies in China

Using Perry and Kraemer’s (1986) codebook, a review on 2,210 articles published in five mainstream Chinese public administration journals from 2002 to 2006 notes that only five (or 0.2%) are central government studies, while much more articles are about urban and regional government (96 articles accounting for 4.3%) and provincial government (six articles accounting for 0.3%) (Cheng and Lu 2009). If we use Terry’s (2005) protocol, then in the case of Chinese journal articles, 76 articles (or 3.4%) are about local government, while only two articles (or 0.1%) are related to central government (Cheng and Lu 2009). The share of studies drawing data from each government level is very small, especially because the articles on other themes and topics are not taken into account. Another important reason is that most studies are normative and non-empirical with generic and blurred application to the theme. For instance, a recent review on Chinese journal articles does not analyse the variations of data sources from each government level (Wu, He, and Sun 2013).

We conduct a literature search to illuminate the central–local divide in China’s political and administrative studies. We use the variants of central government (State Council, ministries and commissions, and central government) and local government (difang zhengfu) as the keywords or title phases to search articles in the Chinese journals. As illuminated in Table 2, the majority of political and administrative articles in Chinese journals from 2000 to 2013 are devoted to local governments rather than...
central government agencies. The title-search approach generates less than 300 articles related to central government, while more than 2,000 articles pertain to local government (see the right columns). If we use the abstract-search approach, we can find much more articles on the central government (see the left columns). However, the amount of central government publications is still incomparable to that focussing on local government. A significant number of researches are actually not on central government, but rather taking the gazettes of State Council or the documentations of ministries and commissions as the background. The number of articles with ‘ministries and commissions’ in their abstracts or titles are evidently fewer than that with ‘central government’ or ‘State Council’, suggesting researches concentrating on central agencies rather than the central government as a whole are disproportionately under-represented. In other words, the analysis of the central–local research divide is by and large conservative and underestimated.

A temporary analysis of these journal articles demonstrates the stagnancy in researches of central government but a steady growth in publications on local government. For instance, the abstract-search approach reveals that the amount of local government studies has grown from 116 in 2000 to 960 in 2013. The title-search approach illuminates the similar momentum, with the number of the researches in local government rising from 60 in 2000 to 248 in 2013. Central government studies have also increased, but its growth rate is much more volatile and relatively lower. A review of 119 articles on China in the SSCI-indexed public administration journals from 1999 to 2009 reveals a handful of studies on China’s central government (Walker, Brewer, and Choi 2014), reconfirming the above findings.

The sources of data and focusses of discussion in the international community are very diverse, without any tiers of government organisations being disproportionately

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Central government (1)</th>
<th>Central government (2)</th>
<th>Central government (3)</th>
<th>Local government (1)</th>
<th>Local government (2)</th>
<th>Local government (3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>208</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>284</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>361</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>345</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>442</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>358</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>507</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>470</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>651</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>512</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>246</td>
<td>719</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>551</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>795</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>581</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>807</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>568</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>281</td>
<td>958</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>667</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>307</td>
<td>982</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>541</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>960</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5,627</td>
<td>535</td>
<td>2,648</td>
<td>7,896</td>
<td>251</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The search results were gleaned in the Academic Journal Platform of National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) (http://epub.cnki.net/kns/brief/result.aspx?dbPrefix=CJFQ) in December 2014. The journal coverage is defined by the Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI), a collection of top-tier journals in each discipline of social sciences. The research period is from 2000 to 2013. The search phases are: (1) State Council (guowuyuan), (2) ministries and commissions (buwei), (3) central government (zhongyang zhengfu), and local government (difang zhengfu).
represented and examined (Pitts 2007). The studies of local government in China, however, are substantially more than that of central government, suggesting a clear preponderance of local government researches over central government analyses. Although some publications depict the phenomena of decision-making and organisational operation in central agencies (Lai and Kang 2013; Cabestan 2009), the study of central agencies in China is generally fragmented and scarce in comparison with that of local ones. An exception is the agency reform (jigou gaige), which has been extensively examined over the past two decades (Christensen, Dong, and Painter 2008). The multiple waves of agency reform since the reform and opening-up in the late 1980s have attracted many scholarships, but most of them are descriptive and normative in nature.

Why do China studies miss central agencies?

The review of extant literature suggests that the unit of analysis or government level in the international research community, particularly in the US, is very diverse, with federal or central government organisations accounting for an approximately equal proportion with state and local governments. In the case of China studies, however, central agencies are disproportionally under-represented in both Chinese and English publications. If we take the central–local ratio of fiscal revenue and expenditure, manpower and influences, the disproportional under-representation of central agencies in political and administrative researches is indeed notable. Why central government agencies as the indispensable players of political and administrative operations in China miss the attention of scholars? The contrasting landscapes of central–local government research can also be examined from the experiences of other countries, especially that of the US. Why can scholars embrace federal government studies in the US, Europe, and other countries?

The obstacles of researching into central government agencies in China

The central–local research divide in China can be attributed to a number of factors—epistemological, realistic or pragmatic. Researchers may mistakenly underestimate the importance of central government agency research due to ideological prejudices or epistemological biases, while realistic considerations may also hamper them from digging into central government agencies. The difficulties facing scholars in examining central government agencies in China can be discussed in three aspects: the presumption on central–local isomorphism and researchers’ pro-local bias, the difficulty in access to data, and the lack of agency comparability and the decreased number of observations.

First, researchers often mistakenly presume that what they have learned from local level could be freely inferred to that of central agencies. The unitary system adopted in China’s administrative architecture is characterised by the ‘isomorphism of government functions’ (zhize tonggou) across the five tiers in the hierarchy (Yang and Wu 2015). Government agencies at each level usually have rather similar functions and responsibilities with their superior and subordinate agencies if any. The analyses of county-level agencies could help us to better understand the operations of
bureaucracies at the prefectural level, and vice versa. The studies of local governments, however, could ‘inform’, but cannot ‘replace’, the exploration of central government agencies.

Central government agencies without upper-tier authorities act very differently from their local counterparts. They are more concerned about policy decision-making than policy implementation, and their behavioural patterns in turn fundamentally differ from local agencies. For instance, central government agencies may have more autonomy and discretion in internal operations and configurational arrangement, which may substantially expand their spectrum of behavioural choice. Different from many local governments struggling with lingering upper-tier policy mandates and financial strain, central agencies are much more financially affluent and functionally autonomous. Without appropriate metrics and benchmarks, the performance of central agencies is more difficult to gauge and compare. In contrast, there are often sufficient comparative agencies in other jurisdictions to take local governments accountable for their performance. We may misunderstand central government agencies without taking account of these environmental, structural and behavioural differentiations, although local government analyses indeed benefit scholarly understanding of central government agencies.

Second, it is difficult to get in touch with senior executives in central government agencies, and it is not easy to gather data necessary for empirical research on central government agencies either. It is widely agreed that CEO and other high-ranking officials are difficult, if not possible, to reach, and thus that researches into top management usually rely on managerial demographics and second-hand data (Finkelstein, Hambrick, and Cannella 2009). In the case of central government agencies, officials are highly ranked and extremely difficult to contact with. Without strong personal ties (guanxi), it is a big challenge to interview these officials (Robertson, Lo, and Tang 2007; Christensen et al. 2012). This can partially explain the predominant surveys used in the extant literature targeting bureaucrats at grassroots level (e.g. counties, towns and villages) (Manion 2010). China ranks much higher in the dimension of power distance in cross-cultural research (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 2010), and the paternalistic leadership ubiquitous in Chinese organisations further enlarges the distance between upper-tier superiors and ordinary employees. Scholars will be frustrated in accessing to central agency employees, which by and large contributes to the scarcity of research opportunities pertaining to central agencies.

The data about central agencies are scarce and dispersed, and it costs a lot to glean, clean and put them together in a consistent dataset form. Before the implementation of ‘Open Government Regulation’ by the State Council in 2008 and the sunshine budget initiatives since 2010, the data on central agencies have been kept just like national secrecy. There are no central data hubs or information centres specifically targeting central agencies, and these data are fragmented and dispersed if available. Although many ministries (e.g. the Ministry of Environmental Protection) publish their yearbooks and statistics periodically, aggregating and standardising them is an arduous task.

Lastly, low comparability among and high volatility of central agencies make it fruitless to concentrate scarce research efforts on their operations. Local governments are relatively diverse and comparable, and it is very easy to amplify your sample at
the prefectural and the county level. Central government agencies, in contrast, vary substantially in their policy domains and functions, which largely depresses their comparability. In comparison with the abundance of observations at local levels, the number of central government agencies is relatively stable and even shrinks due to recent rounds of agency reform (e.g. the super-ministry reform in 2008 and 2012). Different from the relative stability of jurisdictional segmentation or administrative division at various local levels, central agencies have been restructured frequently over the past two decades, making their longitudinal analyses very difficult, if not impossible. In a nutshell, a simple cost-benefit analysis may hinder conscious researchers to tap into examination of central government agency.

The case of the US federal agency research

As early as 1980, multiple sources and forms of data pertaining to federal agencies in the US have been ubiquitous and publicly available (Meier 1980). Scholars can straightforwardly navigate and merge budgetary, personnel, regulatory, legal and procedural data at federal agency and sub-agency levels. The benign research environment of the US federal agency research could be explained by three measures, namely government openness and transparency, performance measurement practices and accountability advocacy, and employee survey tradition and culture.

Openness and transparency are advocated as key mechanism to pursue public accountability and responsiveness, and the US federal agencies are all required to publicise information (Piotrowski 2007). Many decisions and engagement of federal agencies are publicly reported and documented, which contribute to rich gold for research in political and administrative organisations (Fernandez, Malatesta, and Smith 2013). In other words, data availability and abundance are the results of government transparency practiced at the federal level.

Performance measurement is actually a process of collecting performance information, and the promotion of performance measurement practices can largely advance the accessibility of agency performance data. The Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) enacted in 1993 requires federal agencies to measure and report their performance, which helps to generate numerous agency performance information and relevant data (Ellig, McTigue, and Wray 2012). The Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART) introduced by the George W. Bush administration in 2001 further strengthens federal agency performance measurement capacity by deepening performance tracking from agency level to programme level. As elaborated by Moynihan (2013), PART has established a rich dataset on the US federal programme performance. PART was used to track the performance of tens of thousands of federal programmes, and the abundant performance information was very helpful in keeping federal agencies transparent and accountable. The PART dataset, combined with other agency- and programme-level datasets, has contributed to knowledge accumulation of performance management, goal ambiguity, political ideology and other research themes (Moynihan 2013). These initiatives strongly advocated by Office of Management and Budget (OMB), Government Accountability Office (GAO) and other watchdogs have helped to foster an healthy agency climate to release and report performance and relevant data.
Apart from archival data on agency operations and outcomes, it is much more pertinent and relevant to tap into agencies to gauge the perceptions and opinions of officials and employees who actually run these agencies. Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) organised by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) is a case in point. Held every other year (2004–2010) or every year (2011–present), OPM’s survey covers all federal agencies and usually more than 20,000 employees are interviewed.\(^5\) Currently the survey is done online every year, and employees are asked to rate their perceptions of work conditions and organisational environments. The FEVS dataset largely facilitates the progress of research in many fields, e.g. human resource management, organisational change management, innovation implementation, and so forth. Another relevant survey series are Federal Merit Systems Surveys endorsed by the US Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB).\(^6\) The MSPB surveys are used to see whether and how federal agencies adhere to the merit systems. Meanwhile, their coverage is very broad and many topics have been surveyed, including employees’ attitudes towards supervisors, engagement in decision-making, and their perceptions of organisational and management practices. The MSPB surveys usually select a random sample of 50,000 employees to participate in the online surveys every year, and the data generated are available upon request to facilitate their usage in academic cycles. Together with other programme- and agency-level variables, these large-scale surveys have increasingly generated high-quality empirical studies spanning a variety of research areas (Jung 2014).

**Lessons from the research in Europe\(^7\)**

Political scientists and public administration scholars in European countries also actively engage in comparative research on central government agencies, in a manner slightly different from their peers in the US. The Comparative Public Organisation Data Base for Research and Analysis (COBRA) and the Coordinating for Cohesion in the Public Sector of the Future (COCOPS) projects, among others, are two typical endeavours in this direction.

The COBRA, initiated by Geert Bouckaert and Guy Peters at the Public Management Institute of the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium in 2001, is a cross-country public management research network. It aims to bring together international scholars to jointly collect research data for comparative and quantitative analyses on public sector organisation. Its main contribution is a creation of a cross-country database by circulating a common survey instrument to interview senior managers about their perceptions on the autonomy, steering and control, culture, and performance and results of public sector organisations. The COBRA network has been expanded gradually by soliciting new member institutions and replicating its survey in other countries and regions (e.g. Norway, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the UK, and the Netherlands). The COBRA survey has been replicated in 16 countries and regions by April 2010, and 1,567 public sector organisations out of 2,972 surveyed have responded to the common questionnaire (with a response rate of 52.7%).\(^8\) The COBRA project contributes to our understanding of organisational autonomy and control and its variations in different contexts, and the rich data generated from this project have also produced abundant high-quality
publications. The COBRA researchers are considering replicating its survey in its existing member countries and regions, as well as expanding its database in other contexts.

The COCOPS project is one of the largest comparative public management research consortiums in Europe. Funded under the European Commission’s (EU) 7th Framework Programme from 2011 to 2015, the COCOPS project is coordinated by Erasmus University Rotterdam and participated by 10 universities in 10 countries. It aims to assess the impact of New Public Management (NPM)-style reforms in public management and public services in European countries from a comparative and quantitative perspective. The COCOPS project is supported by eight related research projects or work packages (e.g. NPM meta-analysis, NPM and the size of government, survey of public managers, coordinating social cohesion, NPM and social cohesion, and coordination after the crisis), and the Executive Survey on Public Sector Reform in Europe is the cornerstone to support COCOPS’s other work packages. It is the largest survey of public sector senior executives in 20 European countries, and has received 9,638 respondents (with a response rate of 29%) from 10 countries (e.g. the UK, Estonia, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Serbia, and Spain). The survey gathers quantitative data on senior executives’ perceptions on the form, implementation and impact of NPM-style reforms across European countries, generating a rich database to comparatively and quantitatively study the NPM-style reforms.

The CCAD: a research proposal

The difficulties in accessing high-profile officials and collecting high-quality data have largely hindered the growth of central government agency research in China. The above discussions suggest that the US and European experiences in advancing federal government research can benefit China’s central government research. Thanks to the open government campaign over the past decade, increasing data on central agencies in China have been made available to researchers. We believe
that it is the time to reconsider the possibilities and benefits of central agency research. To advance the research on central agencies, we propose to develop the CCAD.

**The coverage of the CCAD**

As a research dataset on central government agencies in China, the CCAD covers key variables concerning the political and administrative aspects of central agencies. In the CCAD, I focus on ministry-level and equivalent agencies directly administrated by the State Council. Although subunits under the ministry-level agencies (e.g. departments, bureaus, offices and divisions) could also be analysed, their data are almost unavailable and excluded from the CCAD. As an exception, less than 20 administrations and bureaus under the ministries and commissions (e.g. State Bureau for Letters and Calls) are also included, since they are vice-ministry level organs jointly supervised by the State Council. For the same reason, the agencies under the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) (e.g. State Archive Bureau) are not covered in the CCAD.

The central agencies constituting the State Council include the General Affairs Office, less than 30 cabinet-level ministries and commissions (e.g. Ministry of Agriculture, and National Development and Reform Commission), one special organisation directly under the State Council (State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission), less than 20 organisations directly under the State Council (e.g. General Administration of Customs), a handful of administrative offices under the State Council (e.g. Overseas Chinese Affairs Office), and less than 20 public service institutions directly under the State Council (e.g. Xinhua News Agency). The administrative levels of the central agencies vary, with the majority at the ministry level and others at vice-ministry level (Qian 2012). In sum, there are totally about 80 agencies in the CCAD, varying across rounds of institutional reform and data accessibilities (see Table 3). When these agencies are appended by year or other time units (e.g. month or tenure in office), the number of observations can be significantly amplified to support more sophisticated statistical analyses, such as panel data modelling and time-series cross-sectional analyses.

### Table 3. The classification of central agencies in China.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency type</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Agency example</th>
<th>Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. General Affairs Office (bangongting)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>General Affairs Office</td>
<td>Ministry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Ministries and commissions (zucheng bumen)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Ministry of Agriculture</td>
<td>Ministry and vice-ministry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Special organisations (zhishu teshe jigou)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission</td>
<td>Ministry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Organisations (zhishu jigou)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>General Administration of Customs</td>
<td>Ministry and vice-ministry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Administrative offices (banshi jigou)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Overseas Chinese Affairs Office</td>
<td>Ministry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Institutions (zhishu shiye danwei)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Xinhua News Agency</td>
<td>Ministry and vice-ministry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. State bureaus (guojia ju)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>State Bureau for Letters and Calls</td>
<td>Vice-ministry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>76</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Date source: The data are from State Council (2013).
A glance of key variables in the CCAD

Table 4 lists the key themes and variables on central agencies with available data. I search journal publications in several research databases (e.g. CNKI) and consult the experts to compile the datasets on central agencies in China. I record the definitions, units, periods, and methods and sources of these variables, and the structure and codebook of the database are user-friendly and easy to maintain and update.

More and more data on central agencies are available online, largely due to the development of their official web portals. China Software Testing Center (CSTC 2014), a non-profit institute based in Beijing, annually assesses the performance of government websites at various levels in China. It evaluates central agency websites by their effectiveness in online information disclosure, electronic service delivery, and online interaction with the public. The data on website performance and its dimensions can be tracked longitudinally since 2002, enabling interested scholars to study various questions on e-government development in the central government.

The openness and transparency of the central agencies have been substantially improved over the past decade, and several institutions release their assessments of agency transparency. The Center for Public Policy Studies at Shanghai University of Finance and Economics (CPPS 2014) has ranked fiscal transparency of the central agencies annually since 2009. The research team sends information request forms with a list of fiscal items to the agencies and evaluates fiscal transparency by their responses and information completeness. In the same vein, the Center for Public Participation Studies and Supports (CPPSS 2013) at the Law School of Peking University assesses administrative transparency of central agencies, although this research team uses a different approach. A research team from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS Law Institute’s Innovation Project Team on the Rule of Law Index 2014) annually reports central agencies’ performance in the disclosure of information through government websites. These data together help us to measure central

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme and variable</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Source and author</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government website performance</td>
<td>2002–</td>
<td>≈60</td>
<td>Annual</td>
<td>Daily monitoring and expert opinions</td>
<td>CSTC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government transparency</td>
<td>2009–</td>
<td>≈50</td>
<td>Annual</td>
<td>Website content analysis</td>
<td>CASS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative transparency</td>
<td>2009–2011</td>
<td>≈40</td>
<td>Biennial</td>
<td>Website content analysis and field check</td>
<td>CPPSS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiscal transparency</td>
<td>2009–</td>
<td>≈90</td>
<td>Annual</td>
<td>Mail survey</td>
<td>CPPS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budgetary revenue and expenditure</td>
<td>2010–</td>
<td>≈50</td>
<td>Annual</td>
<td>Content analysis</td>
<td>The agencies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power</td>
<td>2004–</td>
<td>≈90</td>
<td>Annual</td>
<td>Content analysis</td>
<td>General Affairs Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>2004–</td>
<td>≈90</td>
<td>Annual</td>
<td>Content analysis</td>
<td>General Affairs Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative approval</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>≈60</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>Content analysis</td>
<td>General Affairs Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership (e.g. tenure in office)</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>≈90</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>Content analysis</td>
<td>The agencies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corruption</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>≈90</td>
<td>Monthly and annual</td>
<td>Content analysis</td>
<td>State Auditing Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil service examination</td>
<td>2005–</td>
<td>≈90</td>
<td>Annual</td>
<td>Content analysis</td>
<td>State Bureau of Civil Servants</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: To meet the basic criteria of quantitative analysis, these variables are accessible and measurable at agency level. I try my best to gather central agency data in China. The list is, of course, not exhaustive and will be updated periodically. ‘/’ refers to not applicable.
agencies’ extent of transparency, and interested researchers can further study why some agencies are more transparent and what consequences follow.

The disclosure of budgetary spreadsheets also helps us to gauge the expenditure and revenue of central agencies. Fiscal deficits and other forms are well documented in the literature to gauge fiscal health. The data on specific fiscal items may be used to identify other agency characteristics. The expenditure on fiscal transfer to local governments, for instance, can be a good indicator of central agencies’ bargaining power. These figures (e.g. total budgetary expenditure) can be used to measure agency size, a key control variable in relevant quantitative analyses. Although personnel data (workforce size or bianzhi) are more suitable to measure organisational size, currently they are kept as state secrets and almost inaccessible. A relevant dataset about agency budgets released since 2010 is the expenses on official banquets, overseas travels and government vehicles (‘san gong’ spending), which could be used as a proxy of government waste and corruption.

China is characterised by its heavy reliance on the target-based responsibility systems to control and manage local agents at various levels (O’Brien and Li 1999). The Premier of the State Council annually delivers the government work report to the National People’s Congress, highlighting its key achievements of the previous year and developing national policy priorities for the coming year. The General Affairs Office decomposes the goals and tasks listed in the work report, along with required discretions and resources, into the domains of corresponding agencies. Such task arrangement creates a task-agency matrix, in which the centrality of agencies in the task network could be used to gauge their organisational power (Ma 2014). Political scientists (Meier 1980) and management and organisational scholars (Provan 1980) have developed two distinct research streams of organisational power, but they both use the acquisition and allocation of resources as one of the key indicators of organisational power. The agencies with more tasks and goals are expected to have more power, and we can use the number of tasks as a measure of agency power. Since many tasks have to be completed by multiple agencies, agency collaborations can also be examined by using this dataset. With the help of social network analysis tools, we can easily investigate the attributes and implications of interagency task collaboration network.

The power of government agencies is largely derived from the administrative approvals they own, because local governments and enterprises are subject to these procedural requirements. The central government is actively promoting the openness of ‘power list’, in which the administrative approvals of all agencies are disclosed online to strengthen public scrutiny. Thanks to the release of these data, the number of administrative approval items is a good proxy of agency power.

Leadership matters. Although high-profile officials in central agencies are usually difficult to interview, which is very different from the two European cross-country research projects, their biographies and archival records are easy to navigate online. These demographics are very helpful for us to study the impacts of their characteristics on agency processes and outcomes. The career backgrounds and tracks of these officials are fully disclosed due to the requirements of the ‘Open Government Regulation’, and many interesting research questions can be examined by using these data. A research team led by Shu Keng, is working on central agency leadership ranks
to examine which agencies’ heads are ranked higher in the Party hierarchy. The agencies led by high-ranked heads are expected to enjoy more power and resist institutional change and innovation (e.g. e-government development and transparency), and such propositions could be tested by using these data. A relevant research topic is to explore the success factors of cadre career changes, e.g. why some ministers are more likely to serve long and what affect the probability of ministers’ promotion. The studies on local cadre careers are abundant (Li and Zhou 2005) and central cadre analyses will help us to better understand the central–local similarities and differences in cadre personnel management. Apart from focussing on the leading officials (yibashou), equipped with the rich data the research on top management team (e.g. ministers, vice-ministers and other members of the standing committee of the Party committee) could also be deepened.

Corruption as a subtle concept is very difficult to measure, and scholars often use the number of corrupt cases registered and corrupt officials arrested as its proxies (Zhou and Tao 2009). The corruption scandals of high-profile officials in central agencies are usually revealed by news reports and recorded by the Procuratorate, and these materials can be used to gauge central agency corruption. Public money wrongly used by central agencies are documented by the State Auditing Administration, and the data (e.g. the size of public money, the number of programmes and the amount of officials) can be employed to capture central agencies’ anti-corruption measures (Wu and Zhu 2011).

The information on the total amount of employees in each central agency is unavailable, but the data on workforce renewal are well-documented. The State Bureau of Civil Servants organises civil service examination of central agencies, and the number of vacant positions in each agency is annually released to the public. The number of candidates eligible for these vacancies is also revealed, enabling us to gauge the attractiveness of central agencies by the ratio of vacancies to candidates. It is expected that the agencies with more power (and in turn more resources and benefits) are more likely to attract talents, and we can dig into these data to test this proposition.

Central agencies are responsible for differentiated missions and functions, but they are also subject to similar operational requirements, management challenges and environmental turbulences. Rule-making and policy enforcement are the fundamental architectures of the bureaucracy, and the data on the behaviours of central agencies can help to address many research questions pertinent to these topics. The gazettes and other documents promulgated by central agencies, for instance, can be used to depict the logic and characteristics of rule-making (Yackee 2006). Some agencies prefer releasing documents to other concert actions in implementing their policies, while others are just the opposite. These variations can be well-gauged by the number of documents issued by central agencies, the involvement of peer and subordinate agencies in rule-making, the tactics and strategies adopted in policy implementation, and so forth. The differences in the strategies utilised by different central agencies in policy enforcement can help us to better understand the forces shaping the central–local relations.

Apart from the aforementioned key variables, there are other variables included in the CCAD indispensable for further analyses. The age of each agency is recorded by the founding year, as well as the structural change (e.g. merging, abandoning, revision
and renaming) in each wave of institutional reforms. Agency types (e.g. ministries, organisations, institutions and bureaus) and administrative levels (e.g. ministry- and vice-ministry level) are also essential control variables in agency-level analyses, and they are included as categorical and ordinal variables, respectively. The policy domains of central agencies are classified according to their missions (e.g. regulatory, distributive, redistributive and constituent agencies) (Lowi 1972) and orientations (e.g. whether they work closely with businesses and citizens) (Berry 1994). These demographics of central agencies, together with the aforementioned key variables, can help us to empirically investigate the operations, management, and outcomes of central agencies in a scientifically rigorous way.

As one of the first steps to examine interesting research questions concerning central agencies, the construction, replication and extension of the CCAD can indeed push the research agenda forward. Taking together, the aforementioned data on central agencies in China can be gleaned and integrated to support many theory-based empirical studies, especially quantitative analyses. The incorporation of other variables and data sources will enable interested scholars to fully examine many interesting and meaningful agency-level research questions.

Taking the logic of governance model (Lynn, Heinrich, and Hill 2000), for instance, we can tap into the CCAD to understand ‘how, why, and with what consequences public-sector activity is structured and managed’ in central agencies. A reduced-form model of governance postulates that the outputs or outcomes at individual level and/or organisational level is a function of six categories of variables, including environmental factors (e.g. political structures and legal institutions), client characteristics (e.g. client attributes and behaviours), treatments (e.g. work processes and programme technology), structures (e.g. organisation type, centralisation of control, and budgetary allocations), and managerial roles and actions (e.g. leadership practices, monitoring mechanisms, and career concerns). The development and extension of the CCAD can enable researchers to empirically test the logic of governance model and its explanatory power in various contexts and tasks. Other theories and models of public governance and management can also be examined with the methodological support of the CCAD, suggesting its extensibility and generalisability in consolidating central agency research.

**Conclusion**

Central agencies in China play key roles in political and administrative affairs, but the research on them is disproportionally under-represented. It is the time to change our ‘stereotyped’ mindset or conceptualisation of central agencies. In this article, I discuss the central–local divide in political and administrative studies, and highlight the obstacles undermining the central agency research. In raising the imperative of central and federal government research, I do not intend to depreciate the value of subnational and local government studies. A healthy and sustainable research community should pay equivalent (if not much more) attention to central agencies with local ones. Our understanding of political and administrative processes will be incomplete if we pay disproportionately less attention to the central authority than subnational and local governments. The rise of central agency research may also contribute to
cross-country and comparative studies. For instance, we can compare the validity and generalisability of the existing theories on central agencies in various contexts. I introduce the CCAD in this article and summarise the key variables that could be used in various central agency studies. I encourage the community to pay more attention to central agencies and to work together to develop and enrich central agency datasets and analyses. As mentioned above, the list of variables in the CCAD is not exhaustive and will be updated periodically. It is primarily used as a clue to illuminate the potentials of central agency research in China, and we encourage similar endeavours in future research. When it is ready, the CCAD will be put online to help other scholars to use these data in their studies. The releasing and sharing of the CCAD in the research community will lay a solid foundation for establishing and improving the central agency research field (King 2011).

The development of the CCAD will help researchers to analyse central agencies from various perspectives, but several methodological challenges deserve discussions before proceeding to speculate about its extension and generalisation. As mentioned above, central agencies vary in terms of function and size, and the relatively low comparability among them is one of the top concerns in empirical studies. These structural attributes should be taken into account in appropriate approaches to model central agency behaviours and outcomes, which may help to mitigate omitted variable bias. Another concern comes from the frequent restructuring of central agencies, and researchers should be cautious in treating the restructured agencies (e.g. merged or split ones) the same as their predecessors. It may be appropriate in some cases, but may be proven to be incorrect in other situations. Furthermore, it is helpful to consult multiple sources to gather reliable and in-time data concerning central agencies, since there are no existing consensus on the reliability and validity of these data. Finally, different from easy access to local cadres, researchers without direct touch of people working in central agencies may elaborate some phenomena inappropriately or even wrongly. What actually happens may differ from that written in the article, and complementary qualitative studies by interviewing key informants help.

Apart from hard data or secondary data mentioned above, more can and should be done to encourage senior executive and public employee survey of central agencies. It is the perceptions of executives and employees that matter, and it is meaningful to survey their viewpoints on organisational climate and environment, autonomy and control, and culture and performance. How do central agency employees perceive job security and work autonomy? Are they satisfied with supervisors, group climate and work environment? Does merit link with civil service pay and career advancement? Do senior executives support administrative reform and NPM-style instruments? These and other items can be incorporated into the surveys to answer important research questions concerning central agencies in China. We can learn from the practices of the COBRA and CMCOPS projects in the EU, as well as the FEVS and MSPB projects in the US, and common instruments and items can be adopted to support comparative studies. Although senior executive survey is much more difficult to implement in China than in European countries, ordinary employee survey as in the case of the US can be feasible and fruitful. The Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, and specifically the State Bureau of Civil Servants, should periodically
organise or outsource central agency employee surveys to support public human resource management practices and studies, and the original data should be released to encourage more in-depth data-mining by researchers. Although many central agencies have conducted or outsourced numerous surveys, the National Bureau of Statistics should also strengthen its role in centralising and standardising central agency statistics and surveys. I believe the involvement of various central agencies, particularly those in charge of personnel, finance, information technology and statistics, in the development of the CCAD will significantly advance the central agency research, which can also substantially narrow the policy-research gap ubiquitously witnessed in political and administrative studies.

The advocacy of developing the CCAD to advance quantitative research on central agencies in China, however, does not depreciate the value and contribution of qualitative research on the same topics. Qualitative approaches (e.g. historical and case studies) can deepen our understanding of the operations and decision-making of central agencies, but they also require basic information and fundamental data with regard to specific central agencies. Without essential facts on organisational environments and attributes, qualitative studies cannot depict the full view of central agency operations. In other words, the development, replication and extension of the CCAD will not only support quantitative studies on central agencies, but also contribute to the elaboration of qualitative ones in the same vein.

Notes

1. The case in Political Science is rather complicated, partially due to the clear disciplinary split among state politics, comparative political studies and international relations. Public Administration may also be regarded as one sub-discipline of Political Science. To the best of our knowledge, however, there are few review articles in the field of Public Administration to illuminate the share of various government levels (e.g. federal and local) empirically examined in the literature.
2. Other data sources or fociusses of discussion include public schools, utilities, special districts or types of government (17 articles accounting for 9.3%), non-profit organisations (16 articles accounting for 8.8%), and private organisations (four articles accounting for 2.2%).
3. I am indebted to one anonymous reviewer for his/her suggestion on discussing this point.
4. In the same vein, the study of town and township governments should also be cautiously designed, since they are at the bottom of the bureaucratic pyramid without formal subordinate agencies to give commands.
5. More information can be found at http://www.fedview.opm.gov/.
6. Please go to its website at http://www.mspb.gov/studies/surveys.htm to find further information.
7. I am grateful to one anonymous reviewer for his/her suggestion in including these two projects for reference.
9. More information about the COCOPS project can be found at http://www.cocops.eu/.
10. See the full list of central agencies at http://english.gov.cn/state_council/2014/09/03/content_281474985533579.htm.
13. Personal communication with Shu Keng (17 November 2014).

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