

The Big Questions of Chinese Public Management Research

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Abstract

In 1995, Robert Behn introduced American public administration to the need for common “big questions” to become a significant academic discipline, similar to the physical sciences. Chinese civil service laws were just being promulgated then, and so the discussion that ensued in *Public Administration Review* and elsewhere was not particularly salient for China. The largely U.S. literature did not take an international or comparative turn, yet it later became an active conversation in the Chinese literature, which is struggling to deal with its own identity crisis and the value of its research. Developing the big questions of Chinese public management research is extremely relevant in today’s environment because China is the world’s second largest economy, and their civil service has had significant time to mature. Chinese researchers have recently called for the development of domestically embedded (i.e., Sinicized) big questions. This article discusses the relevance of Behn’s questions on micromanagement, motivation, and measurement in the Chinese context and proposes alternate wordings of Behn’s questions to make them meaningful within the Chinese cultural and institutional context (while avoiding suggestions of replacing the basic Chinese political structure). Our hope is this discussion will spark a lively debate among the relevant Chinese research community.

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Twenty years ago, Robert Behn (1995) introduced readers of *Public Administration Review (PAR)* to “The Big Questions of Public Management.” These were the micromanagement question, the motivation question, and the measurement question. They inspired numerous related *PAR* articles and have driven some research in the field since that time. This was an effort to form a common and meaningful direction for public administration research, yet was “before its time” for the People’s Republic of China (PRC). This article reveals that discussions of the identity crisis within Chinese public administration research since 2002 introduced this U.S. literature to Chinese academics and led to the call for China-specific (i.e., Sinicized) big questions by 2011.

By 1976, China’s 10-year upheaval known as the “Cultural Revolution” abated and left the country with disorder and many of the people with trauma. The academic field of public administration was officially abandoned for over three decades, starting with the 1952 reorganization of Chinese higher education (Lam & Wong, 1996). To help the whole nation recover in a political and economic sense, the second generation leaders of the Communist Party of China (CCP), led by Deng Xiao-ping, sought to switch the focus of Party doctrine from political campaigns (i.e., marketing to promote ideological commitment) to economic development with the slogan “focus on economic construction.”

In 1995, when Behn introduced his ideas, the PRC was less than 20 years into this post-Mao “opening up.” This “opening up” phase expanded rapidly following China’s 2001 move to join the World Trade Organization. China’s fear of falling behind its neighbors (a) increased its focus on law-based civil service models from the West, (b) sought to emphasize professional competence, and (c) saw some separation of government and the economy. At the same time, China launched Master of Public Administration (MPA) degree programs in 2001 and these have expanded rapidly as one means for training new and current public employees.

Although China is an ancient country, the civil service system in the PRC is quite young, with the first *Civil Service Law of the People’s Republic of China* in 2005. This law built upon the 1993 and 1994 provisional regulations and was based heavily on advice from academia and government officials through an official research group that was established by the central government in 1984, yet the CCP is firmly in control of the establishment of all such

policies (Cabestan, 1992; Chen, 2009; Jing & Zhu, 2012; Liou, Xue, & Dong, 2012). This represented a significant shift from the 1949 to 1965 period where Soviet experts were directly training Chinese officials because the expertise is now domestic in origin.

The dominant role of the CCP as expressly enshrined in Article 4 of the 2005 Civil Service Law serves as a significant point of departure if comparing Chinese and Western public management, because it ensures the control of the CCP over the civil service. Essentially, it changes the CCP from a political party to a nationwide political and governmental institution (Liou et al., 2012, p. 112). In addition, the scope of government is extremely broad in China, including nearly all ownership of major industries such as the airlines, telecommunications, banking, utilities, energy, and higher education. The scope of the CCP is even broader as a tool for controlling society itself rather than simply running the government. Such differences clearly change the nature of big questions for Chinese public management. Yet while Marxism programs remain a major training ground for public officials, public administration research and teaching have grown quickly throughout the nation.

Therefore, 20 years after Behn's focus on micromanagement, motivation, and measurement, it is a robust time for Chinese academia to ask the following: How do Behn's three big questions apply to public management in today's China? How can they be reframed to help develop a collective agenda for Chinese public management research? In the following discussion, we seek to reconceptualize or Sinicize Behn's questions. We do not pretend to answer these questions, but rather, like with Behn's article, our intended contribution is to stimulate further academic discussion and exploration among domestic and international scholars of Chinese public management.

U.S. Literature on the Big Questions Theme

Behn's (1995) article had numerous offspring in the Western literature. Francis Neumann (1996) suggested that the big questions must concern the structure and dynamics of the public organization, if public administration aspires to be a science. Drawing upon ideas of the new sciences (Overman, 1996; Wheatley, 1992), he made the case that open systems theory obliges the field to explore organizational theory, public management, and the relationship of the public organization to its environment. In this same *PAR* issue, John Kirlin agreed with Neumann's perspective that public management was a subset of public administration. Specifically, Kirlin (1996) sought to establish four criteria for big questions of public administration in a democracy, and offered seven big questions. These may be less relevant to China as it is

not a representative democracy from any Western perspective; however, some of Kirlin's issues such as "national versus local political arenas," "tradeoffs between design based on function versus geography," and "appropriate roles of nongovernmental collective action" seem appropriate almost regardless of the governing structure. Western views of democracy should not be taken as an article of faith because there are arguments that China is democratizing and that the CCP is relatively grassroots. The key point here, however, is that initial reactions to Behn's work served to broaden the focus rather than staying focused on public management.

Two things happened as this body of literature continued to develop. One is the "Big Questions/Big Issues" series that *PAR* started in 2001 (see Kirlin, 2001, as the inaugural essay for this forum). This broadened the focus out to a "significant public administration" (Kirlin, 2001), public administration education (Denhardt, 2001), whether nonprofit management could help answer the questions (Brooks, 2002), and what the big questions were for nonprofit management (Lohmann, 2007). In general, these made passing reference to Behn's work and sought to move the discussion forward and outward. A virtual laundry list of questions emerged.

Second, the broader academic community got involved, and the discussion moved beyond the pages of *PAR*. This included a specific focus on network management that argued that having good questions and unresolved problems is a sign of academic vitality (Agranoff & McGuire, 2001), a solid argument that public organizational theory must be "the foundation" of any examination of public administration's big questions (French, Spears, & Stanley, 2005), and a loosely related article on the three big questions of public values theory (Bozeman, 2009). These themes appeared in three separate academic journals and thus demonstrate the spread of Behn's call for a collective discussion.

In an effort to tie together what was becoming a broad set of questions rather than a coherent research agenda for the discipline, Richard Callahan (2001) discussed the methodologies for choosing big questions. In brief, he demonstrates that Behn focused on the organizational level while Kirlin focused on the institutional level and that questions should be developed that include and connect the two levels. He states, "valuing both levels simultaneously rejects the primacy of organizational or institutional research as sufficient to respond to the challenges of connectedness and cooperation in public affairs" (Callahan, 2001, p. 493). Callahan admitted that seeking to connect the levels might currently be more theoretical than empirical but that this was healthy because big questions should drive future exploration of a discipline. His stated aim was a typology that encouraged diverse research questions, though it might easily be argued that he was simply seeking to connect the breadth of questions that had already emerged in the literature.

Along the way, this U.S. literature did not take an international or comparative focus or an individual nation study outside of the United States. For this reason, Behn and others also failed to discuss regime survival. Had the 1960s and 1970s heyday of comparative administration ended just as globalization hit its stride? As explained earlier, this article seeks to change this significant gap by focusing specifically on China.

Chinese Literature on the Big Questions Theme

China was a developing country during the early stages of this U.S. academic literature, but one might easily argue that most of China is now highly developed with excellent transportation infrastructure, a universal primary education system, a decent public health system, and an advanced industrial economy. This can be true even if parts of China and parts of the Chinese government are still in need of additional development.

China has an extremely pervasive political party and a civil service that is firmly under its control, still in keeping with the old Soviet style cadre model (Chan & Suizhou, 2007). Thus policy is usually made at the higher levels and can be under direct political control as much as the CCP desires. This also applies to public administration within academia, and so ideology can have a direct impact on academic teaching and research as desired by local, provincial, and/or national CCP institutions. Nevertheless, there has been a vibrant Chinese-language literature introducing Behn's big questions idea, discussing the identity crisis in Chinese public administration, and calling for the need for China-specific big questions, partly as a possible solution to the perceived identity crisis.

Z. Zhang (2002a) seems to be the first person to introduce the big questions in public administration to China. He also published an article focused on the "identity crisis" in the same year, and this article made a systemic analysis of the practice and academic roots of the identity crisis of public management in the United States and criticized the enslavement of studies of public management in China (Z. Zhang, 2002b).

Z. Zhang (2004) maintained his 2002 focus and soon thereafter published an article focused on the need to encourage public managers because he saw that there was much opportunistic behavior that deviated from the public interest, due to the lack of a competitive market and stimulation of public interests. He used principal-agent theory and argued for encouragement of the public interest, self-discipline in ethical decision making, and recognition of the fundamental function of compelling institutional arrangements rather than relying on management models and managers to create the positive sense of the public interest.

Nearly a decade after introducing the big questions to the Chinese research community, Z. Zhang returned to the big questions. He pointed out that, since being introduced, the study of big questions had continued to maintain general concern in discussions of basic theory and had evolved into a special subject in the world of public administration research, after being continuously extended into subfields and departments of administration (Z. Zhang, 2011). In the new century, he saw three major trends: (a) an attempt to respond to some general great issues concerning the whole of public administration system based on a recognition of the leading place of basic theory in construction of the discipline, (b) attempts to improve the efficiency of study of great issues in public administration by improving the methods of such study, and (c) an awareness of the interdependent relationship between generality and speciality through discussions related to subfields as well as the practice of public management. He concluded that, since the initial presentation of its theoretical and practical value, the study of big questions had the potential for enlightening the empiricism-stricken and utilitarianism-stricken Chinese science of public administration (Z. Zhang, 2011).

In 2011, a well-known professor at Sun Yat-sen University, He Yanling worked with Wang Guanglong and also focused on the big questions and the identity crisis of public administration. They stated that the identity crisis is a long-term challenge and that discussions of the big questions could help minimize this crisis, even if answers are seldom clear (He & Wang, 2011). They argued that the answers to big questions might depend even more on one's understanding of the role of public managers in the Chinese society as much as on one's vision of knowledge or theory construction. He and Wang (2011) made the case for three dimensions of questions: (a) at the institutional level where questions of a legitimate administration and the origin of public administration stand out, (b) at the organizational level where questions surrounding effective implementation are essential, and (c) questions of public values, which are critical to an accountable administration. This lines up closely with Callahan's (2001) position that both the organizational and institutional levels must be present in any discussion of the big questions of public management research.

He discussed this topic several years earlier in a theoretical review of published reflections of Chinese public administration studies from 1996 to 2008, basically an extensive literature review (He, 2009). This article determined that the first reflection on modern Chinese public administration was Zhang Chengfu's article on "development, questions, and rebuilding" while approaching the 21st century (C. Zhang, 1996), which started a round of academic reflection that peaked in 2007. He (2009) identified a general consensus that public administration studies were confronted with the problems of localization and standardization due to the rapid development of this discipline, and

that an identity crisis to some extent was hidden in the evolution of public administration studies in China. Therefore, an imminent and pressing task to establish public administration studies with Chinese characteristics (i.e., Sinicization) might be a road out of this proverbial wilderness of the perceived identity crisis. Although the reflection pieces he reviewed had numerous divergent thoughts, they all pointed to the fact that research on actual administrative practices was of vital importance (He, 2009). These reflection pieces did not propose specific big questions, yet the discussions have the same purpose of Behn's reflections on the need for a more coherent identity in American public management research.

Part of the reason 2007 may have been the peak of this discussion is that Sun Yat-sen University held a Youth Academic Forum on "Reflection on the Chinese Public Administration Research," which was jointly initiated by Zhang Chengfu of Renmin University and Ma Jun from Sun Yat-sen University. These are both highly ranked Chinese universities in public administration, management, and policy. Ma Jun made a presentation based on his prior article on the identity crisis and the need for courage to face the tough questions (J. Ma, 2006). J. Ma focused on eight issues in his reflections on Chinese public administration research, including the un-Chinese research emphasis, the prevalence of managerialism, a lack of real-world understanding, a shortage of historical research on public administration, poor research on normative theories, poor quality research methods, a lack of academic norms, and the lack of an ability to guide practice (J. Ma & Liu, 2007). However, there is truly a difference between tough questions—ones we would prefer to avoid discussing—and big questions—ones with the potential to bring some coherence to the public management research agenda and potentially break through this identity crisis.

If 2007 was the peak, it clearly was not the end of this academic discussion of big questions. Ding Huang and Li Xiaofei focused on the need to get rid of the identity crisis and spotted many perplexities still prevalent in the research methods and goals within Chinese public administration (Ding & Li, 2011). They present three general questions: (a) In terms of the development of a public administration with specifically Chinese characteristics, what should be the big questions of Chinese public administration research? (b) In terms of public administration research methods, how can (or should) a research method belonging specifically to public administration be constructed? (c) In terms of the goals of Chinese public administration research, should public management researchers continue to focus on practical solutions even if government chooses to ignore the solutions?

Ding and Li (2011) believed that, to become the big questions of Chinese public administration, questions should be specific to China's economic,

political, cultural, and social dynamics. They concluded that it was pointless to focus on questions of research methods because the identity crisis had thus far constricted the development of a set of China-specific big questions, yet they also concluded that research aimed at providing practical suggestions and workable solutions to existing problems was still acceptable if the suggestions and solutions were not actually adopted by the government of the day.

Therefore the reader can see that this conversation regarding big questions shifted from the U.S. to the Chinese academic literature as China continued to develop a modern governing system, and, importantly, this Chinese literature has called for the development of Sinicized big questions.

Applicability of Behn's Questions to China

Our approach is to consider the relevance of Behn's questions within the Chinese experience and how to ask similar questions that fit within that experience. There is no hidden assumption that China should adopt a Western model of governance or Western values, but rather an explicit acknowledgement that China has a different institutional structure and its own social and political culture. This is in keeping with the call for Sinicization! Chinese public management researchers, in this mind-set, should focus on how to improve research within that institutional and cultural structure. However, Behn's categories should not be rendered quickly in the junk yard, as occurred in much of the U.S. literature that followed Behn's, because his questions are not unique to the U.S. Constitutional system with its separation of powers, checks and balances, and federalist nature. The following discussion shows how they can be reworked with the aim of spurring on a lively academic discussion within China.

Behn focused on core managerial and organizational questions that could be asked within any governmental setting. The applicability and the answers might vary, but he did not, for example, limit his focus to democratic administration like Kirlin. In policy transfer theory, Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) referred to the degree to which a transfer of any program, value, policy, or institution is transferred by stating that such transfers can be copying (straight-forward attempt to replicate), emulation (some intentional adaptation to the local situation), hybridization and synthesis (combining aspects from multiple sources with the local situation; intentional learning), or inspiration (ideas in one place or time serve to motivate similar changes in another place or time). In this context, we provide a discussion based on current Chinese literature and an understanding of the Chinese culture and political institutions that can lead to hybridization and synthesis of the research agenda. It does not suggest researchers should, for example, take a study of Atlanta or Illinois and seek to replicate it for Chengdu or Hubei.

The Micromanagement Question

Behn's micromanagement question was his most extensive as it also involved discussion of three subquestions on trust, governance, and entrepreneurship. He asked, "How can public managers break the micromanagement cycle—an excess of procedural rules, which prevents public agencies from producing results, which leads to more procedural rules, which leads to . . .?" This question seems even more relevant in China because there are far more political actors than in most other systems of government, and civil servants are hired on a permanent basis (i.e., tenured at the point of hire or immediately after a short period of training, except for extreme abuses or failure). This combination means there are far more people creating rules and a strong perception that many officials may have little motivation to follow these rules.

This Leninist system is still based on control of the masses, and this means lots of civil servants for the sole purpose of enforcing rules and processing paperwork. For example, it can take many years for a family to obtain permission to move residency from their hometown to an urban area and typically qualify for more lucrative urban benefits. Under Mao, rural areas benefited in that farmers gained property ownership, yet suffered with serious poverty along with the urban areas. In modern China, urban residents generally earn more and have access to better education and government services (usually including larger pensions). Chen Xingbo (2009) said,

For China, the disparity between urban and rural areas is comparatively [to U.S.] large and so it is appropriate for the goal of public service equality to be more distant. It is more reasonable for China to take as its immediate goal the problem of providing lower-level groups with basic insurance. (p. 184)

For example, rural pensions are lower, and the number of covered individuals is half the national level (Chen, 2009, p. 184). This makes sense, but is not a separate big question for Chinese public management researchers because it is a specific policy issue rather than being about the civil service structure or the functioning of public management.

This transfer of official residence can require dozens of trips involving hundreds of hours, all to appear in person before various public offices with the correct paperwork from other public offices. A sense of "general permission" does not exist, and the various agencies are disconnected, and so each step is bureaucrat-intensive, including purchasing an apartment, establishing utilities, registering children in school, and so forth. This approach truly means that far fewer public employees are delivering services than might otherwise be doing so. Instead, they are focused on procedural rules

that consume time and resources, both from government and from citizens. In many cases, the news from one agency or department require an individual to take days off work to return to his or her hometown for additional documentation. This is merely intended as an example of the focus on process and procedure, over and above service provision.

Why such a system? As Lam and Wong (1996) described, the Chinese party-state is all encompassing, sometimes referred to as “totalism” because of “the virtual nonexistence of a sphere of immunities from political control in society” (pp. 182-183). Although economic reforms and decentralization have significantly loosened this control, the bulk of the economy is still state-owned enterprises (SOEs), and the fiscal decentralization from a decade ago has been reversing. Therefore, a more meaningful question in the Chinese context is “How can Chinese policy makers accelerate the development of an efficient and professional civil service while adapting their institutions for political control of society and the civil service?” This recognizes that the Leninist regime is not likely to abolish itself, yet it does have an expressed interest in a more effective civil service. It also acknowledges that the 2001 establishment of MPA programs and finalizing the civil service law in 2005 were probably positive steps along this pathway.

Trust Subquestion

The trust subquestion asks, “How can public managers reduce the distrust that appears to be inherent in the relationship between the legislative and executive branches of government—and that also inhibits the performance of public agencies?” Behn asks a similar trust question about the “relationship between different units of government.” With regard to this question, there may be more trust in the Chinese system because the CCP is in control of both the legislative and executive systems. In fact, at senior levels, the same person may hold the same title within the party and within the relevant agency. For example, civil service management policy is made by the CCP’s Organization Department, where the members all hold the same title in the Ministry as in the Party (Burns & Wang, 2010, p. 61). The Organization Department is an institution that has determined many public officials must be party members, even though the civil service law does not contain such a requirement. Therefore the question may be more relevant to all other levels.

Chinese dualism creates many positions where there are counterparts who are (a) a party official, usually called the secretary and (b) a professionally trained official, such as the director of a program or the dean of a school. These pairings may develop excellent working relationships or may compete for power on a daily basis, but the system provides that the secretary is the

higher source of power. Thus when conflicts exist, the professional manager must either be extremely convincing or defer enough to reach some sort of *détente*. Either way, this has the potential to reduce performance, as suggested by Behn's question, because the more effective or efficient approach may be ignored by the secretary for political or ideological reasons or may not be defended very forcefully by the professional administrator.

In common terms, professional public managers are expected to be both "red" and "expert," and expert refers more to experience than education. Also, "red" is more important than "expert" in President Xi's China, thereby creating a situation where party secretaries both educate and guide the public managers, rather than the other way around.

However, all systems of government do allow for decisions to be made that are not optimal because there are other values of importance to the government or society. In China, the difference is that the CCP represents both government and society in such value disputes by retaining the authority to make all final decisions. In this context, the trust question might be reframed as "How can professional managers increase their persuasive powers in relation to the party secretaries, toward the aim of stronger agency performance?" In other words, the legislative and executive trust issue may occur at many different levels within the government. The question seeks not to question the legitimacy of the authority system that is in place but to ask how the public manager can best operate within this system. It also puts on the research agenda the extent that public managers and party secretaries are actually focused on agency performance. Perhaps within the overall Chinese system an alternate wording would be "How can the party secretaries and the professional managers best work toward an efficient and effective integration of these two powers, toward the aim of stronger agency performance?" The first question focuses squarely on public management while the second one acknowledges that a solid secretary–manager relationship is of critical importance to the overall system of Chinese governance.

Governance Subquestion

The governance subquestion asks, "How can public managers help clarify how legislators, political executives, and career civil servants should share responsibilities for policy making and implementation?" This question wording does not apply in the Chinese context because the legislative and executive are fused decision-making bodies, and they are intended to be in charge of all policy making. Therefore, it might be more useful to ask, "How can public managers focus on effective implementation while avoiding the appearance that they are seeking to establish or change public policy?"

The political culture has been moving toward a separation of policy making and program implementation, and so if public managers learn how to effectively implement and maintain programs, they would seem more likely to be empowered to “manage this lane.” A study of innovation award winners throughout China revealed that most are in management, service, and collaboration, whereas few are in the area of governance (Wu, Ma, & Yang, 2013). At the same time, when the CCP feels public managers are seeking to change policy rather than implement policy, then the CCP is likely to “manage both lanes.” Of course, this will be viewed as micromanagement by non-political civil servants. From the public management perspective, then, the goal is to demonstrate the ability to perform extremely well in implementation so that over time administrative autonomy might be enhanced.

This is in keeping with the way public administration was officially reestablished as a discipline in 1984 to “solve the problems related to the state’s main tasks in the reform era” (Lam & Wong, 1996, p. 187). In other words, it was viewed as a pragmatic field of study rather than a pure academic discipline, and this could be said of Woodrow Wilson’s (1887) classic essay in the United States as well as the current goals of the American Society of Public Administration. However, Chinese public administration and the civil service were established by the State Council as tools for the CCP (Chan & Suizhou, 2007; Jing & Zhu, 2012; Liou et al., 2012), rather than with the American conception or pretense of a politics–administration dichotomy. The best way for a tool to get used more than other available tools is to demonstrate its usefulness!

Entrepreneurship Subquestion

The entrepreneurship subquestion asks, “How can public managers define and develop an entrepreneurial approach to public management that is not only necessary but also legitimate and ethical?” On the surface, it may appear that when the party-state has the clear potential for “totalism,” that entrepreneurialism has little space to flourish. Research suggests, however, that much innovation is “bottom up” in today’s China (Wu et al., 2013). In addition, as capitalism and government are generally rooted in different values (Dryzek, 1996), it is appropriate that ethics enters this discussion via a question on entrepreneurialism. Entrepreneurialism can also be about leadership or “taking the initiative,” rather than just about competition or the markets. In China, there are at least two clear spaces for entrepreneurialism: local government and SOEs.

The first is within local government, specifically urban areas. City mayors are appointed in various ways and are explicitly political officials, but their career track appears to be based on success at economic development and, to

a much lesser extent, social development (Landry, 2008). Thus, Chinese scholars have been researching entrepreneurial city management. In the larger cities, these mayors are directly appointed from the national level, whereas in smaller cities, they are appointed by the provincial governor. But the career goal of mayors is usually to obtain an appointment at a larger, stronger city to enhance their power, prestige, and salary (Landry, 2008). In American terms, their career path is more like that of the city manager, rather than having a strong, possibly lifelong commitment to their locality (Mingus, Li, & Yan, 2015).

In this area, China has been challenged by widespread corruption, including numerous cases resulting in mayors and large investors/developers ending up with long prison sentences. The sale of government positions by public officials has become an issue, and officials seek to recoup what they paid for their position by selling additional positions (Burns & Wang, 2010; Wang, 2012). So, the challenge here is the “legitimate and ethical” aspect of Behn’s question. We suggest, “How can local economic and social development be encouraged, yet with a strong focus on the public interest?” This provides room for extensive continuing research on how to reduce the seemingly ever-present graft and corruption, thus meaning that one core question of entrepreneurship is actually a big question of public-sector ethics.

Chinese people often do not believe their officials are motivated by the public interest. This expresses the notion that Confucian paternalism may have run amok in modern China. Some systematic research supports this observation, such as Stephen Ma’s study of ethical codes in China. His 1998 research is already dated given the fast-changing Chinese context including significant changes in the prosecution of corruption cases. S. K. Ma (1998) stressed, “The Chinese people hate government corruption but find themselves incapable of exercising effective control over government officials” (p. 1299). However, the exact same things might be said about nearly every system of government. People like to complain. It is especially easy to complain about people who we do not actually know. Thus, more research is clearly needed that examines the extent to which Chinese officials do and do not pursue the public interest.

A poor geographical distribution of the talent pool to spur on creativity and entrepreneurialism is another aspect of the entrepreneurial challenge reflected in current research, and so approaches to achieve a better distribution might be warranted (Qian, 2010). In fact, this research suggests the university is the single most important factor, as opposed to wage levels, available service amenities, or transparency/openness.

This subquestion can incorporate clear financial accountability, both (a) ensuring that favored firms do not win with high bid contracts or get a pass

on poor quality or performance and (b) helping to make sure that the right projects are built rather than the proverbial “bridge to nowhere.” The challenge of adopting new public service values has also been addressed in recent research on China (Hu & Mingus, 2013; Jing & Zhu, 2012).

The second area for entrepreneurial public management is because half of China’s gross domestic product (GDP) comes from SOEs. Thus, public administration and business management may compete with each other to offer meaningful research and education that can best help manage these massive corporations, which control everything from telecommunications and petroleum to banking, airlines, and utilities. Some research has questioned whether these SOEs are always public bodies, specifically under world trade regimes (Ru, 2014). However, there is little doubt that they are controlled by the party-state, though this control has eased significantly since the “opening up” in 1978 and is part of the driving force behind China’s economic development. There is research demonstrating that privatization has significantly improved firm productivity of these SOEs. In particular, the strongest effect at increasing firm profitability is when an outside buyer (i.e., someone not previously involved in a significant way) takes control of the firm from the government (Huang & Wang, 2011).

So a meaningful big question might be “How can China’s SOEs become more efficient without privatization?” The research on the effect of privatization demonstrates that room for increased productivity does exist and so the question is essentially “how to realize into this untapped productivity before or instead of privatization?” As in other nations such as Canada, which developed a Crown Corporations Directorate within the Treasury Board of Canada to study and monitor SOEs, there are a myriad of structures and ownership models for Chinese SOEs. This becomes an area where thoughtful public management research might uncover common institutional arrangements that are working within China to best serve the public interest. However, this might also be an area where China needs to look closely at the way other nations structure and manage SOEs.

The Motivation Question

Behn’s second question asked, “How can public managers motivate people (public employees as well as those outside the formal authority of government) to work energetically and intelligently toward achieving public purposes?” He asks another version of this, which is about how the political system can control the executive system, and calls this the principal-agent version based on popular economic theory. Looking back, this reads as if one question is the carrot (i.e., how can we encourage people to do what we

want?) while the other is the stick (i.e., how can we make them do what we want). Given the control of the CCP over its executive system, it makes sense only to focus on the first aspect of Behn's motivation question.

In keeping with the centuries-old Confucian tradition, China's civil service under the 2005 law has moved away from the conflict-oriented model and toward the harmony-oriented model. The balance between professional expertise and political accountability is at issue here (Jing & Zhu, 2012). Similar to the American approach to public administration of Rosenbloom and Kravchuk (2002), Jing and Zhu suggest three values are at play: political, managerial, and legal. The idea of rule of law is only in its infancy and the "shift from a discretion-based to a rule-based system faces strong political resistance" (Jing & Zhu, 2012, p. 136). In large part, this is because Chinese governance still favors, or at least tolerates, *guanxi*—the importance of relationships over public interest values (Hu & Mingus, 2013).

Today's China appears to value technical skills much more than it used to, yet centralized policy and coordination, combined with the paramount control of the CCP, may do little to motivate skilled technocrats to perform their assigned tasks well. The 2005 civil service law combined the employees of government branches with the CCP organization, thus further integrating the political and managerial functions (Jing & Zhu, 2012). This reinforced the political control orientation rather than moving forward with a concept of apolitical administrative law.

People still flock to these positions as government officials, and so there are over a million test takers for thousands of positions, but arguably because the comparatively low pay comes with excellent benefits and a lifetime sinecure ("Aspiring Mandarins; China's Civil Service," 2010; Roberts, 2012). There is little evidence that a culture of "public service" exists or is why people seek these positions. Again, this goes to the motivation question. If the benefits are what attract those who are hired, rather than the challenge of the job and the chance to make a difference for the nation, then we have an organizational theory question: "How can the culture of the Chinese civil service be developed to reflect the public interest rather than the personal interest?" Although this question may seem universal, the issues packed within this question are more extreme in China. For example, Wang (2012) explained that "the formal incentive system for civil servants has been circumvented by informal incentive alignments: superiors and subordinates work together to buy and sell public posts, which is contrary to the public interest" (p. 129).

Burns and Wang (2010) introduced the Western notion that bureaucrats may work, shirk, and sabotage, in examining the impact of Chinese civil service reforms on civil servants' behavior. They document the large extent that party membership is required for civil service positions and also show

that such requirements vary widely from area to area (i.e., agency, position type, and geography). Thus, similar work within the civil service may or may not come with this ideological prerequisite, depending, at least in part, on the requirements from the local and provincial CCP Organization Department. The challenge is that their fieldwork was done before the 2005 civil service law, and so this and similar types of research should be high on today's research agenda, in keeping with the proposed big question (above). In addition, recent research has focused on direct and indirect sources of remuneration with mixed, yet important, conclusions: (a) China's active approach to reducing nonwage income is a vital step but requires additional reforms in the budget model and (b) increasing direct pay will not necessarily decrease corruption in a country where plenty of opportunities exist (Chan & Ma, 2011; Gong & Wu, 2012).

The Measurement Question

Behn's third and final question is, "How can public managers measure the achievements of their agencies in ways that help to increase those achievements?" This is derived from asking how public managers can measure their individual and their agency accomplishments and asking how citizens can help define appropriate and realistic measures for managers and agencies. In other words, how can we increase accountability that makes sense to the public and also avoid the "we don't control everything" excuse (Behn, 1995, p. 320).

In modern administrative systems, this is largely a question of performance management. Evidence suggests that attempts to explicitly incorporate citizen participation in performance management have been overcome by bureaucratic interests (Yang & Wu, 2013). Yet the Holy Grail of transparency and citizen inclusion does not necessarily lead to increased public trust in government (Grimmellkhuijsen, Porumbescu, Hony, & Im, 2013).

The Chinese performance measurement system pursues many values, and one value is to inform local governments (i.e., townships, counties, cities, provinces, including semiautonomous regions) about goals of the party-state (Chan & Gao, 2013, p. 367). This includes ensuring that local governments conduct ideological indoctrination and recruit new party members, and so, the system is much broader than in the Western conception of government. However, this would fit the nature of the totalist party-state system in question. Recent research suggests this system does manage to balance a variety of such administrative values reasonably well (Chan & Gao, 2013). However, that research is a case study of only one county within the vast expanse of China and is largely based on official documents of performance measurement

rather than an external cost-benefit or performance audit. Chan and Gao's (2013) research was well done because it included interviews with 18 county and township officials, as well as follow-up interviews for numerous years to create a longitudinal perspective. Still, the limitation to just one county begs for additional research.

Although Chan and Gao (2013) concluded that "performance measurement appears to be an impressively useful instrument for dealing with the major socioeconomic problems that the Chinese reformers have encountered over the past two decades" (p. 378), Gao demonstrated a key problem in a separate publication. She explains that it has led to "governing by goals and numbers" and thus fails to address substantive governance issues including the social and political tensions that exist in China today (Gao, 2009).

More broadly, Espeland and Stevens (2008), in their groundbreaking work "A Sociology of Quantification," document specific problems that occur with an excessive focus on quantification:

1. quantification transforms all difference into quantity even when they are not truly comparable,
2. nominal and ordinal measures are considered of lesser value and merely precursors to rigorous inquiry,
3. the measures or metrics determine the general categories that are used for distributing resources (i.e., in China, these are often centrally established, yet the territory is vast and extremely diverse), and
4. as data are filtered toward the top, the uncertainty that exists in measurement gets absorbed and so numbers appear far more robust than they really are.

They explain that measures designed to describe actions and behaviors are quickly used to judge and control it, even at a great distance. In other words, quantification permits strict and dispersed surveillance by simplifying, excluding, and integrating information (Espeland & Stevens, 2008, p. 415). Although this exceptional work is not based on China, it might help explain the Chinese fixation on quantitative research. An additional factor explaining this Chinese fascination with quantification is likely the general lack of transparency, which would lead many officials to avoid answering surveys or consenting to interviews for fear of saying something that is not already public information or that might disagree with higher level officials.

The nature of this research suggests a measurement question focused on balance: "How can China use diverse measures to increase the performance of its public officials and its public agencies while also meeting political demands and obligations?" Such a question does not challenge the existence

of China's Leninist system, but recognizes this system needs more research to ensure better performance of its officials and agencies. "Public managers" should not be specified in the question because much of the solution within this regime may need to come from political officials and the CCP.

This is both a question of management research as well as political balance. Included is the notion that quantification as the sole measure is problematic and so more effective decisions might be made through a blending of subjective and objective approaches (Espeland & Stevens, 2008; Harung, 1993). This might be a breath of fresh air for Chinese academics that seem quite bound by quantitative approaches that can be defended by the laws of statistics and studied through the use of official data, yet one imagines it could still be some time before the qualitative approach of "telling your story" would become acceptable. The question also acknowledges that control is important to the current regime, yet so is doing the right thing (i.e., leadership) and doing it well (i.e., management). Drucker (1966) introduced this idea long ago in *The Effective Executive*, though he was not using the term *leadership* at that time. He simply focused on effectiveness as "get the right things done" (p. 1).

Conclusion

Chinese public management is a relatively new and rapidly developing field of study, and its scholars are looking for a clear and focused research agenda. On the 20th anniversary of the publication of "The Big Questions of Public Management," it is especially fitting to consider adaptations of Robert Behn's questions for the Chinese context because Chinese researchers have called for Sinicized big questions, as we propose in Table 1. China is still a developing nation by some measures but is also an economic and political superpower on the international stage. Why use Behn as the point of departure? There are two key reasons: (a) This article has recently been selected as one of the 75 most influential articles in the 75 years of *PAR* and (b) it focuses on core public management issues rather than on democratic administration, nonprofit management, or another related area that might not be as relevant in today's Chinese context. While creating a unique list of big questions is always an academic temptation, and might have some advantages, being grounded in existing literature usually makes more sense.

As Behn (1995) stated, "My objective is not to dictate a research agenda for the field. Rather, my purpose is to get the field thinking about what questions ought to be at the very top of its research agenda" (p. 322). This article discusses the relevance of his questions within the Chinese institutional and organizational context and proposes reshaping the big questions of public management.

Table 1. Proposed Big Questions for Chinese Public Management Research.

Nature of question	Proposed big question
Micromanagement	How can Chinese policy makers accelerate the development of an efficient and professional civil service while adapting their institutions for political control of society and the civil service?
Trust	How can professional managers increase their persuasive powers in relation to the party secretaries, toward the aim of stronger agency performance?
Governance	How can public managers focus on effective implementation while avoiding the appearance that they are seeking to establish or change public policy?
Entrepreneurship	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How can local economic and social development be encouraged, yet with a strong focus on the public interest? 2. How can China's SOEs become more efficient without privatization?
Motivation	How can the culture of the Chinese civil service be developed to reflect the public interest rather than the personal interest?
Measurement	How can China use diverse measures to increase the performance of its public officials and its public agencies while also meeting political demands and obligations?

Note. SOE = state-owned enterprise.

These questions focus on the organizational and managerial levels, yet the reader will quickly notice the attempt to incorporate the institutional level in keeping with the advice of Callahan (2001) and of He and Wang (2011). Adapting to the local social, economic, and political culture is an important success factor for any such transfer of ideas (Benson & Jordan, 2011; Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000). In fact, the Chinese system is highly integrated and so it is difficult to separate the institutional and organizational levels. Although the CCP has broad control over society—far beyond the scope or reach of government itself—it is also looking for ways to continue on China's amazing path of development. In a society dominated by the role of party and government (i.e., that totalist party-state as described earlier), it makes sense that improvements in public management must be an important part of the pathway to continued social and economic vitality.

While other Chinese scholars will certainly refine these questions and suggest additional big questions, and we strongly encourage them to engage directly in this discussion, we also believe they will also embrace the notion

that Chinese public management needs such a research agenda to coalesce around. We would strongly encourage individual researchers, Chinese universities, and major funding agencies to drive their research agendas with such big questions because this is the most likely path to develop the discipline so that it will contribute to the development of a stronger and more effective government.

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