

STILL MANAGING UPWARDS? FUTURE PROSPECTS FOR PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT IN CHINESE CITY GOVERNMENTS

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Abstract

Performance management has taken widespread hold across Chinese local government. In this article we examine the rationale for and uses of performance management, the stakeholders involved and the tools and techniques adopted. We seek to take stock of current developments, and to look to the future. We are particularly interested to know if future prospects are tied to the current Chinese practice of reporting upwards to higher levels of government rather than outwards to citizens and stakeholders, as is often the case with the use of performance management regimes elsewhere in the world. Given our concern is with the future, we implement a Delphi study of 26 experts from across China on performance management in city governments. We find that performance management is indeed a control mechanism used to manage upwards and downwards using home grown performance evaluation tools and techniques, and that over the short-term these practices will be reinforced. However, findings indicate that performance management is being used to managing outwards to citizens and other key stakeholders, and to enhance service delivery and performance, in keeping with the international performance management movement. In conclusion we discuss the research and practice implications of these findings.

In the last thirty years questions about the performance of public organizations have become internationally prevalent. Performance evaluation, performance management or managing for results have become key tools to raise the performance of public agencies and remain a central concern in the field of public management research and practice (Behn 2003; Moynihan 2006; OECD 2005; Pollitt and Bouckeret 2006). This trend has been accelerated within nations across the globe through New Public Management reforms and the adoption of management practice from the private sector. It has moved beyond the Anglo-Saxon countries where it was first popularised, and one notable example is China where various forms of performance evaluation have been implemented (Chan and Gao 2008, 2009; Walker and Moon 2007; Westcott and Jones 2007). While the measurement of performance is complex, and the adoption of performance measurement and evaluation techniques demanding, it is increasingly accepted as a management tool that permits more informed decisions to be made, and has the intention of achieving public service improvement (de Lancer Julnes and Holzer, 2001). It, therefore, remains an important area for systematic research.

There has been an explosion of performance evaluation in Chinese cities in recent years (Chan and Gao 2008). The research evidence thus far examines performance management and evaluation in one locality (Dai and Teng 2008; Gao 2007), for single agencies (Lui 1995) or focuses upon one segment of the performance management system (Chen et al. 2005). Our research questions are concerned with (1) why and how performance management regimes are used, (2) which stakeholders are involved in the process, and (3) which tools are employed. In answering these questions we seek to contribute towards a debate at the heart of public management reform in China, and performance management regimes in particular by examining if current practices and future priorities are driven by the international trend toward performance management or concerns within China about the most appropriate way to manage public services (Chan and Chow 2007; Chan and Gao 2009; Foster 2006; Ngok and Zhu 2007). To answer these questions about current priorities and future outcomes, and the ways in which performance management priorities may change in the short-term future we adopt the Delphi Method. This is a widely utilized forecasting technique, and is employed when information on the future is uncertain and requires subjective data. Problems of uncertainty are tackled by drawing upon the knowledge of experts, and the technique seeks consensus on the topic under investigation.

The balance of the study is structured as follows: we initially review the literature on performance management and evaluation with a focus upon the Chinese context of our study. Our methods—the Delphi Method, samples and measures—are subsequently discussed before we present the findings of our study. These findings indicate the importance of local context and international processes—we identified an ongoing emphasis upon managing upwards to higher levels of political authority, and downward within the organization and while note there is a desire to manage outward to citizens, reflecting the emphasis upon accountability in performance management elsewhere in the world. Implications of these findings for research and practice are discussed in conclusion.

Managing Performance

Performance in the public sector is typically argued to be complex: performance is multi-dimensional, involves a variety of stakeholders, uses a multitude of tools and techniques, and is used for many purposes (Behn 2003; Hatry 1999). This complexity means that it needs to be managed; a process typically associated with performance planning and target setting, performance appraisal (of individuals or organizations) and performance improvement, enhancing the “common good” of society.

Reasons for and uses of performance management

Research reporting the development of performance management in China presents two somewhat contrasting views of the development of these regimes. The Chinese perspective is of specific strategies and tools being developed in response to local circumstances (Chan and Chow 2007; Chan and Gao, 2009; Gao, 2009; Gong, 2009). However, a number of observers see Chinese performance management regimes as a response to economic liberalisation and the resulting decentralisation of systems that requires the adoption of a range of management practice which are influenced by international practice (Caufield 2006; Chou, 2008; Christensen et al. 2008; Ding and Su, 2008; Foster, 2006; Painter 2008). Indeed, Ngok and Zhu (2007, 218) go as far as to argue that “the entire process of administrative reform, ‘with Chinese characteristics’, as many scholars often qualify it, has coincided with the world administrative reform trend”. As such, the use of performance management regimes in China can be cast as organizational adaptation: that is responses by the Chinese government to changes in the external environment (of which some were unleashed by the government itself as it sought to move towards a market economy) which allows government under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to maintain a strong role (Christensen et al. 2008).

Within China three reasons are presented for the adoption of performance management: to manage central-local relations, to enhance state capacity and to manage control local officials (Gao 2009). Performance management is the modern tool adopted by Chinese central government to exert influence over the many administrative levels of government, and in particular, the large distance between central and local government in the policy implementation chain. This is somewhat different from the purpose of attaining accountability that is painted in the West—be this politicians seeking to hold bureaucrats accountable or for purposes of internal management, and to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of government and increase its responsiveness (OECD 2005). This argument is more fully developed in public choice theory, which argues that information is vested in bureaucrats and the provision of performance data can reduce the information asymmetry. The structure of Chinese government means that performance management is concerned not only with service performance but also with maintaining a stable and harmonious society, and with economic and sustainable development. The hierarchical nature of government

means that performance management is “used chiefly to ensure that local officials comply with higher-level policy priorities” and that “by binding local officials’ target accomplishments to their career future the target-based responsibility system guarantees that local officials will follow the directives that come down from above” (Chan and Gao 2008, 8). These contrasting views can be cast within Moore’s (1995) framework of manage upwards, downwards and outwards. The primary aim within China is upon managing upwards to higher levels of government and downward to ensure that nationally identified performance targets are implemented at the local level. This suggests that there is little prominence attached to managing outwards for “accountability” with the ultimate aim of “enhanced outcomes for society” (OECD 2005, 56).

Gao’s (2009) case study in Zhouzhi County in Xi’an City concludes that performance management has been introduced to assist with state capacity building within government and to enhance policy implementation. The performance targets used in the regimes are able to achieve these outcomes because they specify policy objectives of a higher level of government, and thus hold lower level cadres to account. However, evidence of the use of performance management regimes is equivocal. Foster (2006) presents a detailed case study of the implementation, and subsequent national adoption of, the Service Promise System in the city of Yantai. While Foster (2006, 241) notes the “CCP’s continuing aversion to being bound by clear and enforceable rules and by public opinion”, he goes on to conclude that the Service Promise System is an international tool from the New Public Management rubric and “represented a serious attempt to make the bureaucracy more customer-orientated and professional” (221). Foster’s study sits within broader arguments and justifications for the adoption of performance management (also see Christensen et al. 2008; Caulfield 2006). For example, Behn (2003, 588) poses the question “how well is my public agency performing” and identifies answer that embraces controlling, budgeting and cost control, motivating, promoting, celebrating, and learning including innovation to learn how to put new processes and services in place (also see Hatry 1999). These purposes of performance management map onto the use of results—if the aims are to celebrate success or promote achievements the corresponding use of the information to achieve these objectives is critical, and could include sharing the results with stakeholders and using it to motivate staff, facets argued for within Foster’s work.

The tools of performance management

One area where Chinese practice would appear to dominate is in the practical tools used to implement performance management regimes. For example, the Objective Responsibility System (ORS), initially promulgated in mid-1980s (Chan and Gao 2008) does not just relate to civil service appraisal, but also to the implementation of policies and in its initial form was concerned with work achievements or ensuring that CCP policies were attained (Caulfield 2006; Gao 2007). It maintains the same objective of prior regimes, which it to ensure centralised control through downward management from Beijing into the provinces and to lower levels of governments and to reward and punish top cadres (Chan and Suizhou 2007). In essence this is a performance appraisal system, and because it focuses upon senior cadres it encompasses the performance of the whole level of government under evaluation.

Other performance evaluation regimes have been developed for use in Chinese local government beyond the ORS. The Civilized Institution Evaluation and Selection (CIES), organized by the Office of Spiritual Civilization Improvement, is widely used in most Chinese public organizations. Public agencies apply to be a ‘civilized institution’ if they meet the published evaluation standard their performance reports, following evaluation of documents and site inspection. The Professional Climate Evaluation and Discussion (PCED) and Citizen Evaluate Institution (CEI) are citizen participation performance evaluation regimes developed from the mid-1990s which draw on the

core-Citizen Survey. PCED is organized by the Office of Rectifying Unfair Professional Climate (resident in a city government Supervision Bureau), while CEI is organized by the City Working Committee of CCP, thereby ensuring that all government organizations could be evaluated even if they are not in the formal government. Cities can implement both PCED and CEI because of their different foci, and there is a focus on managing outward.

Alongside these tools others are seen, but their adoption is less widespread. These include international practice such as: activity based costing, 360 degree assessment—which has been used to evaluate public servants' performance under the name 'Democratic Evaluation and Discussion'—Balanced-Scorecard, performance prism and Common Assessment Framework (CAF). The Balanced Scorecard has been introduced into Chinese public sectors recently and has more limited use e.g. Nanjing, Qingdao, Shenzhen and Hailin. In cooperation with European partners, Chinese National Public Administration School introduced CAF into Chinese public agencies and has sponsored some international conferences.

Stakeholders and performance management

Understanding the features of stakeholder, and their ability to influence performance management is important. We draw upon the work of Mitchell et al. (1997, 869) who argue that stakeholders express three characteristics. Power implies the ability of one actor to influence another actor, and to get them to do something that they would otherwise not have done, by means that may be coercive or normative or via incentives. Legitimacy derives from norms, values and beliefs in a social system and promotes the authority of some stakeholders over others. Finally, different stakeholders are able to confer urgency upon a public agency; urgency is likely to be measured by time sensitivity and the extent to which it is acceptable to delay responding to the stakeholder. Our prior discussion of performance management, and in particular the tools used in China, suggests that internal stakeholders are those most likely to be powerful, legitimate and have urgency. In China civil servants and politicians are conflated into one body, as CCP shadows bureaucratic positions. In this unitary and highly concentrated conflicts of interest can arise. For example, audit bodies are not structurally independent, and can be commissioned and report to the same agency or be required to audit departments that are responsible for personnel matters within the audit agency (Li 2009). Alternatively, decentralisation has increased the freedom of local cadres, which has resulted in them promoting their own interests above those of the party and national policies (Gao 2009). The role of external stakeholders in public management processes has been shown to be limited, but useful to assist with capacity building (Li 2009).

The evidence on the reasons for the development of performance management regimes in China, their current use and likely future priorities suggest on one hand that officials are more likely to express accountability upwards to higher levels of government and manage downward to improve performance, using home grown tools that focus on internal rewards and punishment, and identify the CCP and the local government bureaucracy as the most urgent and important stakeholders. On the other hand there is evidence that there may be a wider set of factors that drive current practice and future priorities—regimes also now focus on citizens and have developed characteristics of outward management. We now turn to the methods we used to examine these issues.

Methods

Delphi Method

'The Delphi Method is an exercise in group communication among a panel of geographically dispersed experts ... [it] allows experts to deal systematically with a complex problem or task'

(Ziglio 1996, 9). Performance management in China is particularly suited to this method because we are dealing with prospects that require informed judgements, together with the need to explore numerous issues and many options (Ziglio 1996, 3-4). The key characteristics of the Delphi Method are it is a: repetitive process, maintains the anonymity of the panellists (or at least their answers), involves controlled feedback, and provides a group statistical response (Alder and Zilio 1996; Linstone and Turoff 2002). The Delphi Method structures and refines large amounts of information to achieve and improve judgements and decision-making. The notion of informed judgement is central to policy making and to the Delphi methodology, which seeks to acquire systematic context-dependent information from experts by way of rounds of questionnaires (Engles and Kennedy 2007).

The RAND Corporation developed Delphi as a technological forecasting technique in the 1940s. Considerable expertise now exists on the Delphi Method—a Web of Science search reveals over 1,000 articles using this method. While evidence points towards its increased use in the social sciences (Landeta 2006), there are only a handful of public administration studies (see Critcher and Gladstone, 1998; Morgan et al. 1979; Proeller 2006; Torres, 2005).

Sample

The Delphi technique is predicated on sampling experts, or those that have detailed knowledge on the topic being surveyed. Surveying experts involves balancing researcher and subject bias; that is ensuring that respondents are impartial while having an interest in the research topic. Subject bias may be exacerbated where individuals responding to the survey are likely to be affected by decisions made within the policy area under investigation. However, one important aspect of the Delphi approach is that it seeks to bring about consensus between participants by sharing information. Recognising this key difference between other research methods assists in addressing some of these concerns.

In this study we sampled all members of the Performance Government Management Research Association. The Association was established by Chinese Public Administration Society (CPAS) and reports to the Office of the State Council and Ministry of Civil Affairs. Its aims are to promote research on and the practice of performance management in the public sector. Membership is based on expertise in performance management, through academic reputation or civil service position. Members are selected by the Society, who asked related central government ministries to recommend executive civil servant experts, and its branches at the provincial, municipal and autonomous level of government to recommend four members (typically two academic and two practitioners). The Founding Committee of the Association also selected some members e.g. some academics with high reputation and expert background. In total there are some 151 members (80 practitioners, 66 academics, and 5 state and private enterprise).

We sampled all members of this association inviting them to be members of the Delphi¹. Positive responses were received 34 members of the association, split equally between academics and practitioners. Reasons for declining the invitation to join the Delphi ranged from being too busy to a central government ministry officer feeling that it was a sensitive topic, while a number of those contacted had moved on to new posts. Attrition in Round 2 reduced our respondent pool to 26 experts, and analysis is based on these matched respondents. Panel members were drawn from different economic regions of China: 18 from the east (including Beijing and Shanghai), 9 from mid-China (for example Hubei and Jiangxi Provinces) and 7 from the west (including Chongqing and

¹ The level of expertise on performance management amongst the group of academics in our sample was examined by noting the number of journal articles they had written on the topic. All members had published on the topic, and in some cases extensively, thereby offering some comfort on their expertise and knowledgeability.

Shaanxi Province).

Measures

Survey questions were written in English and translated to Chinese prior to the survey being administered. To ensure the translation was accurate the Chinese language version of the survey was translated back into English to ensure consistency in interpretation. These led to a number of small changes to the characters used in the survey.

Measures were drawn from our reading of the performance measurement literature and current practice within China. The first part of the survey we report examined 'Evaluation reasons: Why undertake performance evaluation in your city?'. Detailed measures were taken from Behn's (2003) study on the purposes of performance measurement and supplemented with questions of innovation (service, process and partnership) and cost reduction². The second part examined 'Stakeholders: Different groups of key actors consulted during your city's performance evaluation', and quizzed respondents about a range of key stakeholders inside and outside the organization (Andrews et al. 2006). The third aspects focused on 'Performance evaluation tools: What are the tools used in performance evaluation in your city?'; items were drawn from existing practices known to the researchers. In the final part of the survey 'Results application: use of the performance evaluation ranking and rating results in your city' were examined, and items were drawn from knowledge on current practice amongst Chinese city authorities. In each section respondents were given the option of supplementing the closed questions we asked.

Three questions, on a five point Likert scale, were posed against each survey item (see table 1). In Round 1 respondents were asked about current priorities to establish a baseline against which the future could be judged. Questions two and three examined prospects; future desirability and future feasibility. These two items were also included in Round 2. In Round 2 we also probed respondents on the extent to which they were confident in their assessments of future feasibility (table 1). All questions directed Delphi panel members to 'think about performance evaluation as it is currently developed in your **local city**'. When respondents were asked to consider the future, they were asked to do so 'over the next three years'.

[insert table 1 about here]

We limited the Delphi to two rounds because of the length of our survey instrument (see above) and associated concerns about attrition. Round 1 was undertaken February 2008 and Round 2 in June the same year. We sought consensus on the questions concerning the future, and posed these questions in Round 1 and 2. In Round 2 we fed back to each participant the group mean together with his or her own score, and asked if they wished to change their rating.

Findings and Discussion

Findings are presented in four parts: reasons for the use of performance management, results application, stakeholders and tools. For each part we discuss the mean scores for current priorities and highlight top and bottom ranked items. We then move on to look at the mean responses for future desirability and future feasibility and the percent agreement reached after two rounds—we do this by indicating the percentage of respondents who gave a response of 4 or 5 on the 5-point Likert scale, and signal agreement by a simple majority. Given our purpose is to look at current priorities and future prospects we also conduct differences of means tests to identify if the gap

² We omit to report fully questions in the methods section; rather they can be found in tables 2-5.

between current priorities and future desirability and future feasibility is statistically significant. Finally, we comment upon the confidence of our respondents in relation future feasibility for each question they answered.

Reasons for undertaking performance evaluation

The means, percent in agreement and t-test results for reasons for undertaking performance evaluation are reported in table 2. Top current priorities for undertaking performance management were focused on managing upward, downward as we anticipated and also and outward which we suspected might be possible (Moore 1995). Managing upwards was identified as the first and second highest priorities ('how can a city government convince political superiors and legislators that it is doing a good job', and 'how can city government improve sustainable development). Tied third was a measure of internal control ('how can leaders ensure that subordinates are going the right thing?') reflecting the importance of managing downward to ensure that city governments got the job done and process innovation ('how can governments achieve new ways to deliver services e.g. IT, one stop services') attaching some importance to managing outward to citizens through innovation. Managing outwards also figured as an important reason for undertaking evaluation and Delphi participants ranked service innovation fifth ('how can the city government put in place new services to citizens'). While these were the highest ranked items, none of the scores exceed four on the Likert scale.

[insert table 2 about here]

The lowest priorities were found for measure that operationlized 'learning' ('why is what working or not working') and 'budgeting' (what fields, groups, or projects should the govern spend the public's money'); both recorded means below the mid-point on the scale. The lack of attention on 'learning' is perhaps an indication of the way in which higher levels of government drive the performance evaluation regime and the priorities of the cities being examined. The low priority accorded to 'budgeting' is likely a reflection of the gap between resources allocation and performance—the unitary system leads to top-down performance target setting and bottom-up resource allocation.

Assessments of future desirability saw four of these five items retain their high rank, the exception being on downward management ('how can leaders ensure that subordinates are doing the right thing?'). The reason 'ensuring that administrative costs are not too high' was seen as desirable in the future but not feasible indicating that respondents to the survey did not see cost pressures as a reason for undertaking performance evaluation. Reasons for undertaking performance management identified as feasible in the future placed emphasis across the process of managing upwards, downwards and outwards. It would be expected that managing upwards and downwards are the most important reasons for undertaking performance management, given our prior discussion. The two items measuring this ('how can a city government convince political superiors and legislators that it is doing a good job' and 'how can leaders ensure that subordinates are doing the right thing') saw high future feasibility ranks but not future desirability. These findings support existing evidence on the role of performance management in controlling lower levels of government, but the lack of statistical significance between current practice and future priorities implies resigned acceptance.

Service and process innovations, ranked as top five current priorities, were seen as desirable in the future and feasible to implement, suggesting that finding new ways to deliver services likely to be important reasons for undertaking performance management in the short-term. Innovation at the local government level in China has become important, particularly with the sponsorship of

provincial and national level innovation awards. Respondents saw service innovations as more feasible to implement than process innovation (t-test results were significantly different for service innovations but not process), and respondents were confident in their responses. These findings are somewhat at odds with research suggesting that performance management is only used as a system of control and capacity building (see for example Gao 2009). A further factor at odds with prior evidence on the rationale for performance management is the lack of future feasibility accorded to sustainable development. Sustainable development was ranked highly for future desirability, but not for future feasibility. Sustainable development is a major CCP policy priority yet is not seen as a reason for performance management. The fifth highest ranked reason for the feasibility for undertaking performance management was ‘to take responsibility for actions, in particular mistakes’, implying a growing role for accountability within performance management.

Our survey participants were less likely to agree on future feasibility, with eight items recording an agreement score of 50 percent or below. However, agreement was highest for the top four rated items, implying that the role for performance management goes beyond managing upward and downward alone. Respondents offered scores above three for their assessments of feasibility indicating that they felt their projections to be reliable.

Two evaluation reasons rated lowly for both future desirability and future feasibility: partnership innovation (‘how can governments work together with other agencies and bodies to deliver innovations’) and ‘learning’. The former finding is not surprising given the recent emergence of non-governmental and other agencies to work with and to deliver innovations, and the centralised nature of personnel promotion in China which means that cadres are likely to require personal association with an innovation to achieve promotion. Delphi panellists, while not rating ‘learning’ as a current priority saw it as desirable and feasible in the future, perhaps because of the perceived need to improve management and service delivery.

Result application

Table 3 presents the Delphi participants assessments for prospects for result application. Current priorities typically related to downward management: ‘implementation, reward and punish’, ‘achieve performance improvement’, ‘communicate and coordinate objectives to subordinates’ and to ‘motivate staff’. These items remained highly rated by the Delphi panellists for future desirability and feasibility achieving high levels of agreement with confidence ratings above three. These findings again emphasises the ‘command and control’ processes seen to typify Chinese performance management. However, these results also indicate a wider role including human resources (‘motivation for staff’) and critically as a tool to enhance the quality of services delivered by city governments to their citizens (‘achieve performance improvement’). The perspective of managing outward was also seen in the use of results with the measure ‘open evaluation results to the public’ receiving a high rating, moving from near the bottom of current priorities to being highest rated for future desirability and feasibility.

[insert table 3 about here]

The experts were all of the opinion that, in comparison to the current priorities means, all uses of performance management results were desirable in the future—mean scores ranging from 3.50 to 4.46, and all were statistically significant. However, they were slightly more circumspect about future feasibility, with seven of eleven means significantly different from current priorities. The four items given the lowest rank for current priorities were similarly lowly ranked for future feasibility. Confidence scores were high for top rated feasibility measures—all above three, meaning they are seen to be reliable.

Some continuity in respondent's answers to questions can be noted between tables 2 and 3. Key downward management processes are not highlighted as important—notably learning, resource allocation and budgeting, training reflecting the findings for reasons for undertaking performance evaluation. These findings indicate that managing upward and downward are key priorities in the short-term for Chinese city government performance management, but that characteristics more readily associated with international practice are also present, notably managing outwards to the public.

Stakeholders

Delphi panel participants were asked to consider priorities and desirability and feasibility for six external and thirteen internal stakeholders (table 4). Current priorities were clear: the three CCP organs and the People's Congress scored highest with mean scores over four. This is not unexpected given the key roles played by the CCP committees in policy and personnel appointment and the important role played by the People's Congress in approving the annual performance report. The mayor, two bureaus and the next highest level of government followed closely behind. The external stakeholders trailed by some way behind the majority of the internal actors with mean scores between two and three. While reasons for and uses of performance management suggested that Chinese city governments managed upward, downward and outward the Delphi participant's report of current priorities emphasizes managing upward to the party and higher levels of government, and horizontally to other departments within the government machinery. Drawing upon stakeholder theory, one interpretation of these results would suggest that the political and administrative arms of government possess power, urgency and legitimacy (Mitchell et al. 1997). CCP and government power is derived from its higher position in the hierarchy of government. The actions of the CCP and government are deemed to promote legitimacy through the norms, values and beliefs within the system of government. The hierarchical nature of Chinese government confers urgency—for example, claims from the political arm of government call for immediate attention by part of the bureaucracy of government.

[insert table 4 about here]

Assessments of future desirability promoted the external stakeholders 'academic experts' to the most important group to be consulted. This, however, does not represent a sea change in future desirability because all other external stakeholders are rated below internal stakeholders, and for future feasibility panellists rate academics as the seventh most feasible group to consult. There are, nonetheless, increased mean scores for future desirability for external stakeholders in comparison to current priorities (all means are above three and the increases are statistically significant). The percent in agreement on these future desirabilities are beyond a majority in all cases, except Workers' Union. The increases in the means of users, citizens, business and academics may be interpreted to suggest that they have legitimate claims to be consulted in the performance management regimes operated, but that they do not possess power or urgency. The mean scores for future feasibility, on first glance would appear to suggest that external stakeholders will play an important role in the future—mean scores remain above three and are significantly different from current priorities. However, more detailed examination indicates that while it may be more feasible to involve them in the future, they are not ranked as highly as internal stakeholders. For example, if external stakeholders are contrasted with internal ones they are ranked lowest bar academics.

Views of the expert Delphi panel were similar for future feasibility. Political organs remain the most highly rated, together with the statistics bureau. Statistically significant increases in mean scores were seen for county or district governments and three bureaus: financial, statistics and supervision. It is important to note that our expert participants were not able to agree on the future

feasibility of consulting external stakeholders, bar academics, and were not confident in their assessments. Reasons for and uses of performance management pointed towards a greater outwards orientation. If this is to continue it would not be unreasonable to expect a growing role to be accorded to external stakeholders. However, in the short-term the evidence points towards the ongoing importance of managing upwards to the CCP and Bureaus.

Performance evaluation tools

The tools used to assist in the performance management process were most likely to be home grown techniques (table 5). The mean current priorities score for two tools was over four: Objective Responsibility System (ORS) and Civilized Institution Evaluation and Selection (CIES), indicating that they were an important priority. The mean for the Professional Climate Evaluation and Discussion (PCED) tool was close to four, indicating quite frequent adoption and while the fourth most common tool was Citizen Evaluation Institution (CEI); the mean here was 3.28 indicating while it was a priority, its was not of the highest order. Performance evaluation tools more widely associated with Western practices were unlikely to be current priorities for Chinese city governments (all means were three or below).

[insert table 5 about here]

Assessment of future desirability by our expert panel offered a slightly different interpretation in comparison to current priorities. ORS maintained the highest mean score (but was not statistically different to the current priorities mean). The second highest mean was recorded for CEI, and the mean was statistically different from the current priorities mean, third was PCED. The mean future desirability score for CIES was slightly lower than the current priorities score, but the difference was not statistically significant. One international tool, the 360 degree assessment, was viewed as desirable in the future. The future feasibility of this tool was also rated as significantly different to current priorities, and it was rated fifth. The future feasibility priorities of the international tools were all above the current priorities and significantly different to the current priorities mean, however, all remained below three suggesting that adoption is not particularly feasible.

Likely use of these tools also reflected our expert's levels of agreement and confidence in them. In relation to future feasibility in particular, agreement levels were all below half for the 'international' tools bar activity based costing and their confidence for all was below three, indicating that their assessments were risky. Our presumption here is that our expert respondents were more familiar with the Chinese developed tools and uncertain about international ones; this in itself suggests that the trajectory for performance management tool use will be upon home-grown techniques, and that priorities may change towards citizen based evaluation. This latter interpretation has to be placed against the low prospects accorded to consultation with external stakeholders (see table 4). This trajectory for performance management tools suggests that they fit the Chinese characteristics thesis: that they are typically home grown, rather than simple (outright) adoption of Western practice, and when adopted are fitted to local circumstances (Chan and Suizhou 2007).

Conclusions

In this article explore the short-term future for performance management in Chinese cities and posited competing hypotheses on factors influencing the use of performance management: Chinese characteristics, which would see an emphasis upon managing upward and downward or international practice, which would be associated with managing outwards and other practices. Because our orientation was towards the future we adopted the Delphi. Findings support the Chinese characteristics thesis as many facets of the regimes now and in the future are geared

towards control and capacity building, as expressed through managing upward and downward, using home grown performance management tools and techniques and consulting internal stakeholders. However, the Delphi panel respondents saw a wider role for performance management that embraced managing outwards to citizen and innovating and aspects of human resource practices and to achieve performance improvements.

These findings reflect the nature of purpose of performance management in Chinese local government—to control the behaviour of lower levels of government—but suggest that small traces of some of the rationale for performance management in Western countries may be penetrating the Chinese model. They also reinforce evidence presented elsewhere that China has not blindly adopted management reforms from elsewhere, and when they have been adopted they have been blended to the local context (Chan and Chow 2007; Ngok and Zhu 2007). Additional research on the mechanisms and adoption strategies of management reforms in Chinese agency would provide more systematic justification of such claims, while providing invaluable insights.

One of the central tensions for managers in Chinese local governments will be to balance off desires for more outward and user/citizen orientated approaches to and uses of performance management with expectations about who should be consulted during the processes. Evidence from elsewhere indicates that there is value in bringing these stakeholders into the process, and that they can produce more deliberative results. Change over the coming years may see more information provided to the public, it will be interesting to see if the public in turn demand more from their city governments. If they do the tasks of city managers will become more arduous. The findings also suggest that systems once established can be quite stable, witnessed by the ongoing attention focused on home grown evaluation techniques. It is, however, important to note that mechanisms initially designed to evaluate the personnel performance of cadres have been altered to focus on other objectives, here the evaluation of city governments more broadly, while other regimes have been developed to draw citizens into the process. Change in the performance management regimes may, therefore, be more incremental than radical. Future research could examine this, and build upon the study results presented here, by way of multiple cases in different provinces across China to understand if adoption and use of performance management varies by locality.

There are few reports of the use of the Delphi technique in public management. The tool itself could be of value to policy makers when looking to develop policy and consider future options. It is argued to be of particular use when data are soft and uncertain. Uncertainty, resulting from the global economic crisis, has become lucid during the period of this research (2008-09) and this is unlikely to change, indicating the ongoing relevance of tools such as this. While the technique requires certain skills and adroitness in its application, it is within the grasp of most public agencies. It can be used to assist with planning new policies and strategies at any level of government. It is, therefore, a potentially viable new tool for the armoury of public management in the search for more informed evidence based policy and practice.

Having promoted the Delphi technique, there are a number of limitations that need to be borne in mind: credibility, applicability and auditability (Engles and Kennedy 2007). Internal validity is based upon the experience of the panellists: did they find the results credible? Credibility is tested on an ongoing basis: Delphi panels are predicated on communication and feedback as results are fed back to the panel at each stage. While divergence of views is to be expected across the large geographical area examined in this project, panellist had the option to query the findings as they emerged. Auditability was achieved through the use of objective and transparent methods, and consistent and systematic data collection, coding and analysis. Readers looking for wider lessons

of this study need also be aware of its external validity. Chinese government and politics is of a particular type, and thus the detail results are likely to be primarily applicable to this context. Having said this, our findings point towards the importance of the use of performance management and performance management as tools to enhance the performance of public agencies and to facilitate managing upward, downward and outward. Evidence would suggest that these factors are achieved by performance evaluation systems (Boyne and Chen 2007). Applicability will be uncovered over time, as the pertinence of these findings become clear in the future practice of performance management in China.

The findings here provide support for the processes of managing upward, downward and outward in performance management and evaluation. While new research is required to answer questions about the performance consequences of performance management in China, the views collected from the expert members of our performance management Delphi imply that these approaches and techniques have common effects irrelevant of location.

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Table 1: Instructions to respondents

| Item | Round | Questions | Measurement scale |
|---------------------|--------------|---|---|
| Current priority | 1 | To what extent are the below uses of the performance evaluation results a key priority now? | 1 = not a priority and 5 = main priority |
| Future Desirability | 1, 2 | How desirable is it that the below uses of performance evaluation results are extensively included in the next three years | 1 = not desirable and 5 = desirable |
| Future Feasibility | 1, 2 | What is the feasibility of the below uses of performance evaluation results are extensively included in the next three years? | 1 = low and 5 = high |
| Confidence | 2 | How confident are you in your predication of future feasibility | 1 = unreliable (great risk of being wrong, of no use as a decision basis) 2 = risky (substantial risk of being wrong, not willing to make a decision based on this alone) 3 = reliable (some risk of being wrong, willing to make a decision based on this but recognizing some chance of error) 4 = certain (low risk of being wrong, decisions based on this will not be wrong because this is a 'fact') |

Table 2: Means, standard deviations, percent in agreement for reasons why evaluate

| Evaluation Reasons | CP | FD | FD>3 % | FF | FF> 3% | C |
|--|----------------|-------------------|-----------|----------------|-----------|------|
| | mean (sd) | mean n (sd) | | mean (sd) | | mean |
| Promote 1: how can a city government convince political superiors and legislators that it is doing a good job? | 3.71 (1.04) | 3.96 (.62) | 79 | 3.72 (.94) | 56 | 3.00 |
| Promote 3: how can city government improve sustainable development | 3.59 (1.01) | 4.08 (.80) | 73 | 3.54 (.95) | 46 | 3.00 |
| Control: how can leaders ensure that subordinates are doing the right thing? | 3.48 (1.16) | 3.77 (.99) | 65 | 3.77 (.76) | 65 | 3.08 |
| Process innovations: how can governments achieve new way to deliver services e.g. IT, one stop service | 3.48 (1.16) | 4.00* (.89) | 77 | 4.00 (.75) | 81 | 3.16 |
| Promote 2: how can city government enhance the satisfaction of citizens | 3.38 (.92) | 3.81* (.80) | 65 | 3.54 (.81) | 50 | 3.12 |
| Service innovation: how can the city government put in place new services to citizens | 3.36 (1.15) | 4.23* (.82) | 85 | 3.73* (.72) | 65 | 3.04 |
| Motivate: how can leaders motivate employees to do the things necessary to improve performance? | 3.32 (1.18) | 3.81* (.80) | 65 | 3.50 (.76) | 50 | 2.96 |
| Accountability: to take responsibility for actions, in particular mistakes | 3.32 (1.35) | 3.96* (.92) | 77 | 3.68 (.80) | 48 | 3.04 |
| Reduce local costs: ensuring that administrative costs are not too high | 3.24 (1.16) | 4.00* (.94) | 77 | 3.65 (.75) | 50 | 2.96 |
| Partnership innovations: how can governments work with other agencies and bodies to deliver innovations | 2.76 (1.05) | 3.50* (.76) | 50 | 3.04 (.82) | 19 | 2.69 |
| Learn: Why is what working or not working? | 2.63 (1.01) | 3.58* (.86) | 62 | 3.42* (.81) | 38 | 2.84 |
| Budget: what fields, groups, or projects should the government spend the public's money? | 2.72 (1.17) | 3.69* (.79) | 58 | 3.50* (.86) | 50 | 2.92 |

* = p. < .05 – t-test results for difference current priorities and future desirability and current priorities and future feasibility

CP = current priority, FD = future desirability, FF = future feasibility, C = Confidence

Table 3: Means, standard deviations, percent in agreement for use of results

| Result Application | CP | FD | | FF | | C |
|---|----------------|----------------|---------------|-----------------|---------------|--------------|
| | mean (sd) | mean (sd) | FD >3 % | mean (sd) | FF >3 % | mean (sd) |
| Implementation, prize and punish | 3.80 (1.12) | 4.35* (.80) | 81 | 4.19 (.90) | 77 | 3.15 |
| To achieve performance improvement | 3.56 (1.08) | 4.46* (.71) | 88 | 4.19* (1.13) | 73 | 3.23 |
| Diagnose and control problems | 3.48 (1.16) | 4.15* (.83) | 81 | 3.65 (1.09) | 65 | 2.92 |
| Communicate and coordinate objectives to subordinates | 3.32 (.85) | 4.15* (.78) | 85 | 3.92* (1.02) | 73 | 3.08 |
| Motivation for staff | 3.32 (1.07) | 3.96* (.60) | 81 | 3.77* (.82) | 62 | 3.12 |
| Adjust work arrangement | 3.20 (1.15) | 3.69* (.79) | 50 | 3.69* (.79) | 58 | 3.12 |
| Allocate organizational resources | 3.12 (1.05) | 3.81* (.85) | 54 | 3.62* (.98) | 46 | 2.92 |
| Organizational learning and development | 3.04 (1.06) | 3.81* (.90) | 58 | 3.54 (.81) | 50 | 3.00 |
| Open evaluation results to the public | 3.00 (1.19) | 4.54* (.65) | 92 | 4.19* (.98) | 77 | 3.19 |
| Supply training opportunities | 2.96 (1.31) | 3.50* (.99) | 58 | 3.27 (.87) | 35 | 2.96 |
| Prepare for budgeting | 2.88 (1.09) | 3.77* (.95) | 58 | 3.38* (.90) | 35 | 2.77 |

* = p. < .05 – t-test results for difference current priorities and future desirability and current priorities and future feasibility

CP = current priority, FD = future desirability, FF = future feasibility, C = Confidence

Table 4: Means, standard deviations, percent in agreement for stakeholders consulted

| Stakeholders | CP mean (sd) | FD mean (sd) | FD >3 % | FF mean (sd) | FF >3 % | C mean |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------|---------------------------|----------------------|------------------|
| <i>External Stakeholders</i> | | | | | | |
| Academic experts | 3.33 (1.13) | 4.46* (.65) | 92 | 4.19* (.90) | 77 | 3.35 |
| Business: state enterprises | 3.29 (.86) | 3.65* (.63) | 65 | 3.35 (.75) | 50 | 3.00 |
| Business: private firms | 2.72 (1.02) | 3.62* (.90) | 50 | 3.35* (1.02) | 42 | 2.92 |
| Individual users | 2.52 (1.08) | 3.92* (.91) | 72 | 3.50* (.93) | 46 | 3.04 |
| Citizens: the general public | 2.48 (1.08) | 3.92* (.93) | 77 | 3.35* (1.02) | 46 | 2.96 |
| Workers' Union | 2.28 (1.02) | 3.31* (1.01) | 42 | 3.00* (.57) | 28 | 3.04 |
| <i>Internal Stakeholders</i> | | | | | | |
| CCP Committee | 4.32 (.90) | 4.27 (.96) | 73 | 4.31 (0.84) | 85 | 3.23 |
| CCP Discipline Inspection | 4.20 (.91) | 4.27 (.87) | 81 | 4.46 (.71) | 88 | 3.44 |
| CCP Organization Department | 4.16 (1.03) | 4.36 (1.04) | 84 | 4.40 (.83) | 88 | 3.28 |
| People's Congress | 4.04 (.81) | 4.23 (.76) | 88 | 4.23 (.86) | 81 | 3.27 |
| Mayor | 4.00 (1.14) | 4.23 (.76) | 88 | 4.23 (.99) | 85 | 3.27 |
| Audit Bureau | 3.92 (1.15) | 4.12 (.78) | 84 | 4.08 (.98) | 73 | 3.40 |
| Personnel Bureau | 3.92 (.95) | 3.65 (1.06) | 65 | 3.84 (.90) | 68 | 3.24 |
| Provincial government | 3.92 (1.04) | 4.08 (1.09) | 81 | 4.15 (.88) | 77 | 3.19 |
| Statistics Bureau | 3.76 (1.05) | 4.35* (.85) | 85 | 4.35* (.80) | 81 | 3.42 |
| Supervision Bureau | 3.72 (.84) | 4.35* (.80) | 81 | 4.15* (.83) | 81 | 3.19 |
| People's Consulting Conferences | 3.52 (1.19) | 4.04* (.92) | 77 | 3.88 (1.11) | 65 | 3.15 |
| County or district governments | 3.44 (.96) | 3.77 (.95) | 65 | 3.81* (.90) | 65 | 3.31 |
| Financial Bureau | 3.17 | 4.12* | 92 | 3.92* | 92 | 3.19 |

(.89) (.65) (.76)

* = p. < .05 – t-test results for difference current priorities and future desirability and current priorities and future feasibility

CP = current priority, FD = future desirability, FF = future feasibility, C = Confidence

Table 5: Means, standard deviations, percent in agreement for performance evaluation tools

| Performance evaluation tools | CP | FD | FD >3 % | FF | FF >3 % | C |
|---|----------------|-----------------|---------------|-----------------|------------|--------------|
| | mean (sd) | mean (sd) | | mean (sd) | | mean (sd) |
| Objective Responsibility System (ORS) | 4.16 (.99) | 4.38 (.75) | 85 | 4.15 (1.05) | 81 | 3.23 |
| Civilized institution evaluation and selection (CIES) | 4.04 (1.06) | 3.64 (1.29) | 52 | 3.88 (1.01) | 64 | 3.00 |
| Professional Climate Evaluation and Discussion (PCED) | 3.96 (1.14) | 3.85 (1.16) | 65 | 3.85 (.97) | 65 | 3.04 |
| Citizen Evaluate Institution (CEI) | 3.28 (1.31) | 4.35* (.80) | 88 | 4.08* (.89) | 73 | 3.00 |
| Activity based costing | 3.00 (1.08) | 3.58* (.95) | 50 | 3.62* (.94) | 54 | 2.96 |
| 360 degree assessment | 2.56 (1.12) | 3.65* (1.09) | 54 | 3.31* (1.23) | 50 | 2.81 |
| ISO quality assurance | 2.52 (1.26) | 3.08* (1.09) | 35 | 3.00* (1.13) | 27 | 2.65 |
| Balanced-score Card | 2.38 (1.31) | 3.15* (1.22) | 38 | 3.15* (1.01) | 42 | 2.73 |
| Performance prism | 2.46 (1.10) | 3.23* (.86) | 31 | 3.00* (.80) | 23 | 2.62 |
| Common Assessment Framework (CAF) | 2.08 (1.10) | 2.65* (1.16) | 15 | 2.73* (1.12) | 19 | 2.46 |

* = p. < .05 – t-test results for difference current priorities and future desirability and current priorities and future feasibility

CP = current priority, FD = future desirability, FF = future feasibility, C = Confidence