

## How Can Government Become Responsible? Trajectories, Meanings and Intentions

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How can government become responsible? Is this something we can reasonably expect to achieve? What does “responsibility” in government mean in terms of institutions, procedures, and substantive outcomes? These questions on the meaning and efficacy of government have for a long time dominated practical and intellectual debates across a range of societies, but have still escaped resolution through any definitive conclusions. Indeed, interest in these questions has sometimes waned as people became frustrated with “the difficulty in providing answers.”<sup>1</sup> Writing in 1966, Winter characterized the concept of responsibility as being both “useful” and “ambiguous.”<sup>2</sup> Some 30 years later, Harmon suggested in 1995 that the difficulty of finding an answer to the responsibility question to the satisfaction of most lies in the *necessarily* paradoxical nature of responsibility.<sup>3</sup> Discussion of responsible government immediately invites thoughts as to whom the responsibility is directed, what constitutes responsibility (responsiveness?) and ultimately how *control* over the government may be imposed by the source of responsibility (accountability?). How can a government, or

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government actors to be precise, be held responsible *for* their actions — which requires their being able to act freely and not subject to control, as well as being responsible *to* their constituents, and thus subject to control by the latter, at the same time? Does it make sense at all, therefore, to talk about “responsible” government, or are the contradictions exaggerated by an obsession with linear clarity?

Seeing dilemmas and tensions within the concept of responsibility is perhaps no novelty. Back in the 1960s, Niebuhr dwelt at great length on pressing home the point that human existence is fundamentally relational in nature, so that any discussion of responsibility cannot possibly depart from the interaction between us and other as subject-and-object *at the same time*.<sup>4</sup> Responsible government involves the government as the “maker” of policies as well as “answerer” to society’s need for action or nonaction (leave us alone!), each requiring different, if sometimes conflicting, approaches to improving efficacy and thus responsibility. The way to responsible government, and its definition, hence defies a single formula. As Cooper more recently put it, the challenge is to resist the temptation to ignore the tensions, or even hold to the pretence of having dissolved them, and instead to accept the inherent co-existence of contradictions and “struggle with them as specific situations demand.”<sup>5</sup>

The papers in this theme issue share this caution against any single formula. Given the multiple facets of responsibility, we hold that the meaning and form of the concept, *as it is applied in a specific historical context*, are constituted and configured *as part and result of* the process of interaction between these various dimensions of meaning. It is thus possible to achieve a fruitful understanding of the *what, why* and *to whom* of government responsibility through examining the *process* whereby government responsibility is and was attained, or denied, in *specific* contexts and instances, an approach to investigation which Winter has described as “historical contextualism.”<sup>6</sup> Each paper here seeks to look at a specific situation, or through a specific perspective, to discern what principle is less or more important, how a value or interest is traded, or upheld, what means are adopted, by whom, and for whom. By following the flow of the “changing waters” we hope to capture snapshots of the changing senses of what is meant by responsible government, and the shifting means to it *in a particular context*.<sup>7</sup>

The contexts discussed in the papers are the two major Chinese communities in East Asia — mainland China and Taiwan. This Chinese focus has a major implication for the specific configurations of questions

posed, and answers tentatively provided. The foremost impact flows from the relative absence of a democratic framework, as yet, in these communities when compared to the Western democracies with which most discussions on responsible government in the literature are concerned. Indeed the preferred term adopted in the Western literature on the topic is “administrative responsibility,”<sup>8</sup> reflecting a narrow focus on the administrative branch — and more precisely the appointed bureaucrats — rather than on the government as a whole, comprising the legislative, executive, and judicial branches, and including the elected as well as bureaucratically recruited officers. This does not imply an ignorance of issues of responsibility beyond the administrative branch. For instance, Arch Dotson notes in his seminal paper “Fundamental Approaches to Administrative Responsibility” published some 50 years ago that “the problem of administrative responsibility is ... but one aspect of the larger and older problem of political responsibility.”<sup>9</sup> Still earlier, Roland Pennock discusses the issues, and meanings, of government responsibility alongside the concepts of responsiveness and majority rule.<sup>10</sup> In practice, however, these broader questions of political legitimacy have been largely placed *outside* the immediate ambit of responsibility enquiries in the mainstream literature in the West, and the preference has been to take care of them in other discussions, on, say, democratic theory.<sup>11</sup>

Why is there such a self-selected bias towards the administrative and what are its impacts on the substantive emphasis of the resultant discourse? On the “why” question Dotson has this to say:

... the problem of administrative responsibility is the problem of power... [W]here do administrators secure their power and why do they possess it? ... all administrative power is conferred. Not merely in a formal, but in a substantive sense, ... [But why should this happen?] Basically, the power of the bureaucracy is a product of (a) the new role of the state in economic and social affairs and (b) the inadequacy or unsuitability of the rest of the political system to that role.<sup>12</sup>

The focus on the administrative reflects the development in the practices in the Western governments: *within and despite* the democratic framework of government, the bureaucracy has acquired numerous powers under modern conditions, often with the “consent” of and delegation by the rest of the political system. To the extent that this trend is irreversible, most activities carried out in the name of the government

are in fact delivered and decided by recruited administrators.<sup>13</sup> On the whole, achieving responsible government becomes, in effect, *largely* a question of achieving responsible *administration*.

Not only is responsible *government* reduced, practically, to responsible *administration* but the question of what issues are relevant in the latter is also structured by the democratic framework of government. Attention becomes focused on the *gap* between the idealized vision of how political responsibility works in a democracy, and the actual practice of government and politics with all its complexities and untidiness. The idealized version suggests a neat line of command between the elected representatives of the people as the “political masters” and the bureaucratically recruited administrators as the “servants.” Actual practice — as the “real life” of government work requires — mandates a more nuanced picture, in which the near-autonomous power of the administrators looms large. Under such circumstances the issue of administrative responsibility — how to make administrators perform their job responsibly — has been understood primarily as a dilemma between accountability (and control) and professional autonomy and agency, sometimes referred to simply as “objective” and “subjective” responsibility.<sup>14</sup> In the latter case, distinction is drawn between the “external” sources of responsibility regarding a person’s behaviour *vis-a-vis* sources “internal” to the person as the actor. Given the structural role, in a formal-legal sense, of the administrators being the servants of the elected officials, the balance of the dilemma in the discussion is inevitably tilted towards the objective dimension, in other words, the control of the political masters over their agents.<sup>15</sup> The subjective side, which highlights the agency autonomy of the administrators in their own right, is relegated to a secondary and supplementary role.<sup>16</sup>

Compared to the Western discourse, discussions in this theme issue on responsible government in Chinese societies, where a democratic framework is either absent or not strong, exhibit two characteristics. First, the discussion is directed to the government *as a whole* rather than to a specific part of the political system only. One or several parts of the system may still receive more attention than others, due to a judgment or perception that these parts are more influential or susceptible to scrutiny in the specific context under investigation. Such analyses nevertheless are usually intended to contribute to an evaluation of government performance generally. Secondly, in terms of substantive content, the

discussion does not exhibit a structural bias in favour of either the objective or the subjective dimension of responsibility. This does *not* mean that both the objective and the subjective attract equal attention or are accorded the same degree of importance in the papers. As a matter of fact they are not. But whilst various papers may place more stress on either the objective or the subjective, the different emphases are due to circumstances contingent to the specific contexts discussed, which *may* include, but are not restricted to, the formal political framework. These inclinations towards one dimension or the other thus exhibit a greater degree of fluidity than those in democratic societies: the direction of the discussion is likely to change more frequently, and over a greater magnitude across communities and time.

With these characteristics the papers in this issue serve to direct the discussion of responsibility back to its basics. Can governments be responsible *despite* a democratic deficit? How do governments or the actors therein manage — define, manipulate, achieve, or deny — responsibility? What actors are involved, both within and outside government, in this process and why and how do they act in the way they do? What, in practical terms, is responsibility, as revealed in these trajectories?

### Can Government Be Responsible Despite a Democratic Deficit?

The following dual “facts” should sensitize us to the possibility that governments *may* be responsible, despite a democratic deficit: that many governments over the world have yet developed a working and “sustained” democracy; and that the “mature” democracies of the day are a very recent phenomenon in the history of government. Common sense would, thus, lead us to *doubt* the absence of *any* form of responsible government before the coming of age of democracy. Indeed, an affirmative answer should be self-evident, bearing in mind the developmental aspect of history: today’s democracies *were*, and emerged from, the authoritarian regimes of yesterday. Whilst this “emergence” is itself the *problematique* requiring investigation, and the literature on institutional change tells us of the indeterminacy of the process, this at least points to the observation that responsible government involves *more* than democratic government.

Tak-Wing Ngo and Yi-Chi Chen’s paper on Taiwan under martial law addresses this question of responsibility without democracy head on.

Setting its sights on Taiwan under the Kuomintang (KMT, the Chinese Nationalist Party) in the 1950–60s, shortly after that party's defeat in the Civil War with the Communists and its retreat from the mainland, the paper asks the critical question, "Is it possible to have a responsible government under authoritarianism?" Widely acclaimed as an "exemplar of the developmental state," and more recently presiding over the opening up of the political system and introduction of competitive elections up to the top of the system — the presidency — even to the point of *losing* its right to rule as a result,<sup>17</sup> the KMT-led government in Taiwan provides the perfect backdrop to understanding the dynamics of government and institutional change. As Ngo and Chen note, the KMT regime was notorious for its corruption, inefficiency, and lack of accountability during its rule in mainland China. "Yet the once predatory regime seemed to undertake a radical change...after its retreat to Taiwan." "How did it do it? How did a bad government turn better?," the paper asks. Even if democracy defines responsibility in government, the question remains: what makes a non-democratic government, which is by definition *irresponsible* under the democracy-responsibility definition, move towards democracy and thus responsibility?

Ngo and Chen identify a factor critical to this question: US foreign aid. The aid was important not in the sum of the monies *per se* or in the number of infrastructural and other projects it has brought, but in the host of organizational, procedural and institutional changes the aid programme firstly triggered and then sustained. The process took place both as intended and unintended consequences. The administrative rationalization reforms, such as the imposition of a strict budget discipline, planning guidelines and procedures, and the institution of an organizational set-up which cut across bureaucratic fiefdoms, were designed by the American aid agencies to serve the purpose of the aid programme. By ensuring that aid monies were properly spent, the US aid bureaucrats strove to finish the job assigned to them: to reduce the need for future aid commitment. As the paper puts it, "There is little evidence to suggest that the US had tried to use the aid package as a means of fostering a more responsible government in Taiwan ... the main concern was transparency and accountability to the US aid mission, not the general (Taiwan) populace." Nor was the US aid working its way alone in this process. Domestic actors and concurrent processes were also critical. Not only did practices and norms externally imposed come to be internalized in the domestic professional bureaucracy but these

processes were also welcomed and supported by parallel active processes and promotion within the bureaucratic networks. The chain of institutional change happened only, the paper concludes, because of a combination of, as well as the interactions between, pre-existing domestic factors and the *new* external factor of US aid.

The paper's discussion does not cover the more recent moves towards democratization in the island republic. By focusing on the rationalization reforms of a technical nature in the earlier period, the paper implies that these seemingly mundane developments were instrumental in making government "more responsible" — the KMT government became more effective in its policies, witnessed sustained economic growth, and eventually sat through political reforms that voted itself out of power. The enhanced technical competence, improved organizational structures and greater degrees of transparency and rationality paved the way for further improvements in responsiveness to societal needs. As such the technical reforms are an early but necessary step, if also unintended, towards a more developed responsible government. Responsible government is conceived as a historical product as well as a process; the paper details the process at one critical juncture, looking at the circumstances under which institutional innovations and ideational changes towards responsible government emerged, and took root, under an authoritarian regime.

The same issue — responsibility without democracy — is raised in the case of mainland China in Chengxin Pan's paper. The People's Republic of China (PRC) is still suffering from a democratic deficit when compared to Taiwan of today. To the extent that responsible government implies a government performing for the well-being of the people, the track-record of the PRC government in overseeing the impressive China miracle is, despite various shortfalls and problems, undeniable. The question is: how can an authoritarian regime become responsible, albeit only in limited arenas? The paper turns to the role of ideas and political culture in order to find an answer. Specifically, it is argued that a kind of "contractual thinking" has mediated the relationship between the party-state and the society (the people), fostering a symbiotic dynamic wherein government leaders define the interests of the government in terms of securing the loyalty of citizens, who then possess a "right" to resist unwelcome government decisions. Contractual thinking also leads to a more sympathetic interpretation, amongst the government officials, of the citizens' resistance actions, contributing to a

government response in favour of enhancing the well-being of the people, and thus the development of responsible governance.

The papers by Ngo/Chen and Pan share one common theme that underlines the possibility of non-democratic governments moving towards responsibility: the role of a sense of crisis and shortfall in legitimacy. Taiwan's crisis in the 1950s was immediate and imminent, given the recent military defeat of the KMT in the Civil War with the Communists. In mainland China, waves of turmoil and violent infighting since 1949 indicated the magnitude of disagreement within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) about how to move forward, despite a common desire to leap big. In both cases the subjectivities within the ruling party-state elites compensated somehow, and somewhat, for the lack of bottom-up feedback and participative mechanisms as these may play in working democracies. There is no pretension that these movements towards responsible government were anything more than limited and partial. Moreover, as both papers similarly point out, these limited achievements in responsible government have often taken place as a side product beyond the original intention of the authoritarian state actors.

### Managing Responsibility through the Objective and/or Subjective

If governments under non-democratic conditions may move towards responsibility, albeit often unintentionally, how exactly are such trajectories manoeuvred? Given the emphasis on the objective dimension — accountability and control — in the Western discourse, is the objective or the subjective more dominant in the Asian context, and how do they interact with each other? The papers by Ting Gong and Wai-keung Tam shed light on these questions in specific arenas of contestations in the PRC.

Gong's paper on the Internal Supervision Regulation (ISR), a Party regulation, suggests that under the CCP the party-state has oscillated between subjective and objective means of achieving designated objectives of "responsible" government. Against a bias in the Maoist years, stretching back to before 1949, for the subjective, and attempts through mobilization campaigns and rectification efforts to inculcate in the minds of cadres the necessary attitudes to act "responsibly,"<sup>18</sup> in the ISR the party-state turned to the "objective," in order to set in place the institutional arrangements for more effective in-party monitoring of elite

performance, and thus move towards better responsibility. Indeed both the subjective and objective dimensions have been concurrently present throughout the Communist period, as Gong notes about Mao's remark made in 1945: "only under *public supervision*, can the government not slack off; only by making *everybody* responsible, can we avoid failure" (emphasis added).

Even without a formal democratic framework, party-states are nevertheless bound by a diffuse sense of accountability to the society as constituents. In Chengxin Pan's paper this diffuse accountability is captured by the concept of social contract. It also suggests what Richard Niebuhr means by the relational nature of anything social. Government as class of activity is certainly a social phenomenon; hence it cannot avoid being related to, whether working for or answering to, or both, the society in which a government situates, and the people in it, no matter what the formal answering mechanism may be. And this is even truer of the concept of responsibility. In Niebuhr's own words:

The idea or pattern of responsibility ... may summarily and abstractly be defined as the idea of an agent's action as response to an action upon him in accordance with his interpretation of the latter action and with his expectation of response to his response; and all of this is in a continuing community of agents.<sup>19</sup>

As the subjective project of the earlier decades — "making *everybody* responsible" without much external supervision — had floundered and corruption cases escalated (which suggests the failure of the subjective efforts), the party leaders have eventually come around to the need for more vigorous objective means of responsibility, so that the once-shelved ISR received priority attention and its promulgation was expedited after more than a decade of delay. "The party declared," Gong writes, "if we don't fight corruption, we will lose the ruling power. The party will be destroyed by itself." Underlying the change in strategy was thus a changed perception amongst the party leaders of circumstances which called for new action, *and* their expectation of response from society to the new action now being pursued, or the lack of it. The echo with Niebuhr's emphasis on responsibility being one's response to the anticipated response of others to one's earlier and current actions, is loud and clear.

This interweaving of the subjective and objective dimensions of responsibility is taken up again in Wai-keung Tam's paper on hospitals.

Tam asks why public hospitals in contemporary China have so utterly failed in fulfilling their legally mandated duty to treat patients irrespective of means, whilst performance was apparently much better at an earlier period when material conditions of life were worse. The answer is found in a combination of subjective and objective conditions: a changed perception amongst government leaders (not the public) of the expected role, and responsibility, of the government in medical care provision; cutbacks in government resources to the medical sector; the collapse of the social and administrative infrastructures, urban and rural, that had supported and financed medical care before 1970s; the subsequent development of incentive and appraisal structures in the hospitals and in local government finance that encouraged, and fed on, the commodification of medical care; and finally the weakening of the traditional professional ethics of physicians which required the provision of adequate treatment to the needy.

The process of breakdown in responsibility was rife with tensions and far from linear. Indeed the many reports on the failures of hospitals, as cited in the paper, were often greeted with dismay and frustration in the government as well as in society, revealing a subjective feeling that things should have been otherwise — that responsibility had failed and justice been denied. What has sustained such failures, despite acute uneasiness with them, has been a complex web of institutional structures and arrangements developed incrementally through the years since economic reform, often as adaptations in response to the short-term demands of ongoing circumstances. This perhaps explains why the hospitals' duty to treat irrespective of the patient's ability to pay was codified into law at a time when such a duty was mostly neglected in practice. The failure in responsibility was a consequence beyond the original intention of government officials who had anticipated, mistakenly, the emergence of a public health sector financed at arm's length. As if putting together a jigsaw without knowing *a priori* what it pictured nor having the right mix of pieces around, the government could only put forward more rhetorics when faced with despair and confusion—and it needed to provide a response. One or two additional pieces will not sort out the mess, however, nor will piecemeal replacements of ill-fitting pieces. As Tam suggests in the conclusion to his paper, to put things back on the right course the government will need more than an incremental approach to the existing problem, especially regarding the objective conditions.

## Not a Conclusion

China under the CCP party-state or Taiwan after 1949 are without doubt the habitats of very different governmental systems. What pulls them together for investigation in this theme issue are not any assumptions of state project or developmental stages across diverse trajectories. These would be too imposing for us to consider here if not also intellectually suspect. I would rather suggest a modest, and also mundane, consideration for the rationale of this issue — that these two Chinese societies share many spaces of diverse dimensions (historical, cultural, political, economic, social) and their often intensive interactions, though not always amicable, have had an immense effect on their respective trajectories. Put simply, this interconnectedness means that it makes sense for papers analysing either of these communities and governments to be placed together here as an “interconnected” intellectual product. Let us now turn to the papers themselves to see how this interconnectedness is exhibited.

## Notes

1. John Burke once described, amongst students of government, an “abandonment of any attempt to delve into the murky realm of the ought and instead to hew more closely to the descriptive and factual.” John P. Burke, “Responsibility, Politics, and Community,” in the “Spirited Dialogue” forum on Michael Harmon’s *Responsibility as Paradox*, *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 56, No. 6 (November/December 1996), p. 596.
2. Gibson Winter, *Elements for a Social Ethic: Scientific and Ethical Perspectives on Social Process* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), p. 244.
3. Michael Harmon, *Responsibility as Paradox: A Critique of Rational Discourse on Government* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1995). Terry L. Cooper in his critique of Harmon argues that the paradox, or dilemma, inherent in the concept of responsibility has always been acknowledged in previous discussions on administrative responsibility and ethics, so that Harmon is not “discovering” anything new. Cooper, “The Paradox of Responsibility: An Enigma,” in “Spirited Dialogue” forum on Michael Harmon’s *Responsibility as Paradox*, *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 56, No. 6 (November/December 1996), p. 600.
4. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963); and (explicitly on the subject-object duality) *Faith on Earth: An Inquiry into the Structure of*

- Human Faith*, edited by R. R. Niebuhr (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 27–30.
5. Cooper (Note 3), p. 600.
  6. In Winter's words, "historical contextualism ... proceeds from the conditions and pre-given structures of an historical world and yet explores new values and possibilities amid competing and complementary interests." "Responsibility" was selected as a typical concept well suited for illustration of such an approach. Winter (Note 2), p. 244.
  7. James Scott has eloquently explained the value of following the "flow of the tides of the changing waters" in order to approximate an understanding of matters of a complex nature. Such an art, of getting to know by going through the process, or through practice, he calls by the Greek term *metis*. Examples of activities that can only be "learned" through *metis* are driving a car, cooking, navigating a boat into or out of a busy harbour, teaching, and certainly politics — and responsible politics. James C. Scott, *Seeing Like the State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Conditions Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).
  8. A sample of book and journal article titles reveals this self-limiting of responsible government issues to the administrative branch: John Burke, *Bureaucratic Responsibility* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Terry L. Cooper, *The Responsible Administrator: An Approach to Ethics for the Administrative Role*, 6th ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006); Arch Dotson, "Fundamental Approaches to Administrative Responsibility," *The Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (1957), pp. 701–27; Charles E. Gilbert, "The Framework of Administrative Responsibility," *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (1959), pp. 373–407.
  9. Dotson (Note 8), p. 717.
  10. J. Roland Pennock, "Responsiveness, Responsibility and Majority Rule," *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (1952), pp. 790–807.
  11. One core concept in this broader picture of government responsibility as a whole is "public interest," or the related "will of the people," which Pennock has described as "slippery ... at best." (Pennock [Note 10], p. 791). On "public interest," which is used often in our day-to-day practical conversations, and even in law, it has been noted that the concept has had "no serious treatment" in the public administration literature since Glendon Schubert, Jr.'s 1957 piece in *The American Political Science Review*. See Cooper (Note 8), pp. 91–93, for a discussion.
  12. Dotson (Note 8), pp. 720–21.
  13. See Dotson (Note 8), pp. 722–23 for a rebuttal of the "conservative reaction" and a call for a return to the old, simpler days.
  14. Winter (Note 2), p. 245.

15. The normative dimension is also relevant here, that absolute political control over the bureaucrats is largely construed as the *desirable* if impossible scenario under the idealized version of democracy. The entire discourse of administrative responsibility may thus be seen as an exercise to pull back the runaway administrators and to place them back under political control *to the greatest extent possible* given the competing demands of modern government. See discussion on the "legislative supremacy" argument in Dotson (Note 8), pp. 711–15.
16. This is also the major thrust of Harmon's critique of the literature on administrative responsibility — its bias towards the structural and the control and neglect of the subjective nature of responsibility in *Responsibility as Paradox*. However, Harmon himself still cannot escape from the structural trap, as he is obliged to embed his notion of the personal responsibility of the administrators in the communal practices, inviting critique by John Burke on the amount of freedom the administrators may practically exercise under this alternative vision of communitarian politics. See Burke (Note 8), pp. 598–99.
17. The landmark developments in the political opening up process were the ending of Martial Law in 1987, which made political activities and political parties other than the Kuomintang legal, and the introduction of direct elections to the presidency in 1996. The Kuomintang candidate lost the presidential election in 2000, and again in 2004, to the then opposition Democratic Progressive Party candidate Chen Shui-bian.
18. Given the difficult objective conditions under which the CCP had fought its way to governing status before 1949, it is perhaps no surprise that more emphasis was placed on cultivating the subjective dimensions of responsibility. An exemplar is Liu Shaoqi's long speech on "Enhancing the internal qualities of party members" delivered in the then party base of Yanan in July 1937. See *Liu Shaoqi Selected Works*, Vol. 1 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1981), pp. 97–167. Thanks to Philip Ivanhoe for alerting me to this speech.
19. Niebuhr (Note 4), p. 65.