

## BOOK REVIEW:

# Social governance and educational reform in contemporary China

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### BOOK REVIEWS:

Shizheng Feng (2023). *Social governance and political order in contemporary China*. London: Routledge. ISBN: 978-1032416960. 238 pages.

Philip Wing Keung Chan (2020). *Public education reform and network governance: Lessons from Chinese state-owned enterprise schools*. London: Routledge. ISBN: 9781138625082. 192 pages

The landscape of social governance and education in China offers a rich field for academic inquiry, having achieved significant milestones such as implementing nine-year compulsory education, expanding higher education and promoting vocational training programs. These initiatives have substantially contributed to poverty reduction and economic prosperity over recent decades. However, this progress has also brought forth numerous challenges and issues, such as disparities in education quality, regional inequities and the complexities of balancing state and market governance (Guo et al., 2019). These issues have been widely researched, highlighting the ongoing difficulties in achieving equitable and effective educational reform in China.

This review examines two significant works on Chinese governance and educational reform: Shizheng Feng's *Social governance and political order in contemporary China* (2023) and Philip Wing Keung Chan's *Public education reform and network governance: Lessons from Chinese state-owned enterprise schools* (2020). These books illuminate the intricate relationships between governance, policy implementation and social order, offering valuable insights and perspectives on modern Chinese governance and educational reform.

Feng's book offers an in-depth exploration of the Chinese state's strategies to maintain social and political order, delving into the historical evolution of governance and analysing the relationship between law and politics. The book examines how legal reforms, driven by political imperatives, contribute to the state's legitimacy and ability to manage social conflicts. A significant portion of Feng's book is dedicated to the petitioning system, which allows citizens to present grievances directly to the authorities and serves as a mechanism for addressing social discontent. Feng includes a detailed analysis of the system's evolution, its role in social governance and its impact on state-citizen relations. Feng also explores the broader issue of social conflicts, analysing the

state's strategies for managing and mitigating these conflicts. The book examines various forms of social unrest, such as labour disputes, land conflicts and environmental protests, and how the state's responded to these challenges. Feng argues that the state's approach often involves a delicate balance between coercion and co-optation. He concludes with a discussion of the paradoxes inherent in China's transformation. They are the contradictions between economic liberalisation and political control, the challenges of balancing development with stability and the tensions between central and local governance. Feng's final reflections consider the prospects of China's social governance and political order, acknowledging both achievements and ongoing challenges.

Chan's book provides an in-depth analysis of the transformation of State-Owned Enterprise (SOE) schools in China, which were initially established by government-owned businesses to provide education to the children of their employees. These schools played a crucial role in the public education system, especially when the government lacked sufficient resources to fund education nationwide. The book examines the transition from state-controlled to more autonomous, market-oriented educational institutions, drawing on network governance theories to this reform process. Chan highlights the historical context where SOEs were established to serve enterprise employees' children while being tightly controlled by the state. With the economic reforms and introduction of market mechanisms, the government sought to separate educational institutions from direct enterprise control to improve efficiency, accountability and educational outcomes. A network governance approach is a decentralised governance where various stakeholders (including government agencies, schools, parents and the community) collaborate to manage and improve educational services. This approach, seen as more adaptable to modern educational needs by policymakers and education practitioners, contrasts with the traditional hierarchical model. Through detailed case studies, Chan illustrates how SOE schools have navigated this transition. The case studies of the Railway SOE schools in Harbin and Shenzhen reveal improvements in school management and educational quality, as well as issues such as disparities in resource allocation and the need for capacity-building among administrators and teachers. The book also discusses the Modern Enterprise System (MES) implemented in the reform process to transform SOEs into profit-oriented entities with greater autonomy, necessitating the separation of their social functions, including education.

The two books, although focused on different explorations, share interests in several related topics. I discuss three of them here: (1) governance models, (2) the role of the state, and (3) centralisation versus decentralisation. First, governance models in China offer a unique blend of authoritarian control and modernisation efforts. Both Feng and Chan explore the complexities of these models, with Feng examining them through the lens of social and political order and Chan focusing on their impact on public education reform.

Feng examines the broader social governance mechanisms, including the roles of law and politics in maintaining order, and focuses on two universal issues in contemporary Chinese social governance and political order: the entanglement of law and politics, and the mode of 'movement governance'. He argues that 'movement governance' (Feng, 2023, p. 14) is one of the most distinctive features of China's social governance model. Feng's 'national movement' refers to a wide range of movements; he examines their

formation, status and historical development. Feng's analysis enhances our understanding of how these governance structures address complex social issues in China. He argues that national movements are pivotal in mobilising societal resources and aligning local efforts with national goals. They are often initiated by the state and serve to address urgent social issues and implement significant policy changes efficiently.

In contrast, Chan focuses on the governance model in SOE schools under the central planning system. Examining the transition from hierarchical to network governance in SOE schools, Chan argues that the governance model was still characterised by a highly centralised structure since these schools were directly controlled by the state and managed by the SOEs. This centralisation ensured uniform policies and guaranteed funding but often led to inefficiencies and limited autonomy for the schools. Chan's analysis provides insight into the challenges and potential benefits of shifting towards a more decentralised, network-based governance model.

Second, the role of the state in China is central to both works. Feng depicts the state as playing a central and dominant role in governance and social transformation and characterises the state's power in terms of its ability to mobilise resources and enforce its will to achieve modernisation and political goals. Feng (2023) states: 'The modernisation of China requires a "strong start" because only a strong state can defend the political and economic independence of the nation' (p. 23). When analysing the petitioning system, Feng states:

The state is not a simple counterpart of social ideas, structures, and processes, but a relatively autonomous subject of action with its own relatively independent preferences, interests, and operational mechanisms. (p. 116)

On the other hand, Chan's book discusses the state's role in educational governance and the transition from a hierarchical to a network governance model. The state's influence remains significant, particularly in policymaking and governance reform. Chan (2020) discusses the relationship between state and network governance as:

The key members in a Chinese policy community are the state as actor and government departments at the central level but not local governments and their agencies, nor non-state actors. (p. 36)

These summaries and quotes illustrate the pivotal role the state plays in governance and policy implementation in China, emphasising its centralised control and its adaptive strategies in response to changing governance needs.

Third, both books are interested in 'centralisation versus decentralisation' debates, discussing China's transition from a centralised system to a more networked or decentralised form of governance. This transition reflects broader shifts in governance models and the state's approach to managing society and public institutions. Feng's book highlights that China's modernisation has traditionally relied on a strong, centralised state. The central government has historically wielded considerable power to mobilise resources and implement policies nationwide. He proposes the concept of despotic power as central to understanding this control. 'Despotic power refers to the range of actions which the (state) elite is empowered to undertake without routine, institutionalised negotiation with civil groups' (Feng, 2023, p. 51), underscoring the top-down nature of decision-making. The decentralisation shift involves the state facilitating more localised

decision-making processes and incorporating a broader range of stakeholders into governance mechanisms.

In comparison, Chan describes a highly centralised governance model under the central planning system in the context of SOE schools. Such a model stresses direct state control over educational institutions, with SOEs managing schools on behalf of the state. The governance structure is characterised by strict hierarchical control and centralised decision-making processes. These schools were directly controlled by the state and managed by the SOEs. Chan's book examines the transition from this centralised model to one that incorporates network governance. This new governance model allows for more decentralised and participatory decision-making processes that involve various stakeholders, such as local governments, schools and non-state actors. Network governance represents a shift towards a more collaborative and flexible approach, enabling better coordination and problem-solving. 'Network governance provides an innovative way for states to guide their societies, largely in response to the inadequacy of the hierarchical governance model' (Chan, 2020, p. 33).

In a comparative analysis of similarities, both books highlight the inherent tension between centralisation and decentralisation in China's governance. They underscore the necessity of a strong central state to maintain national unity and implement large-scale policies, while also recognising the benefits of decentralising certain functions to improve efficiency and responsiveness. Regarding differences, while Feng's book focuses on the broader implications of centralisation and decentralisation across various aspects of governance, Chan's book provides a more focused analysis of the education sector, particularly the transition within SOE schools.

Both authors offer compelling arguments. Feng's strength lies in his detailed examination of the petitioning system and its role in maintaining social order, providing a unique perspective on state-citizen interactions. His historical analysis effectively highlights the evolution of governance mechanisms, though his approach occasionally lacks a deeper exploration of grassroots movements and their impact on governance. Conversely, Chan's work excels in its practical application of network governance theories to the educational sector, with robust case studies from SOE schools that illustrate the challenges and successes of governance reform. However, Chan's analysis might have benefited from a broader scope, incorporating a variety of educational institutions to strengthen the generalisability of his findings. Both authors adeptly utilise their chosen methodologies, yet their works would be enriched by addressing these respective gaps, offering a more holistic view of Chinese governance and educational reform.

In conclusion, Feng's and Chan's works provide valuable frameworks for understanding China's governance evolution. Their analyses highlight the importance of balancing centralisation with decentralisation, offering lessons pertinent to China's governance systems and governance systems worldwide.

## REFERENCE

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