

# Risk and Individualization: An Inquiry About the Ethic of Accountability and Its Challenge to China's Bureaucracy

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**Abstract:** This article aims at the challenge to contemporary China's bureaucracy despite its great economic achievement acquired in the past four decades since the Reform and Opening era and discusses within the sight of Risk Sociology how China manage to escape the trap of national governance such as the middle-class and involution traps, which can be used to interpret the rise and fall of post-industrialized countries.

In part one the overall performance of China's economy and the challenge it faced are discussed; in part two the basic beliefs of contemporary China's bureaucracy, especially those of local bureaucratic system was outlined and questioned; in the last part it's argued that China's evolution trend and self-orientation in the decadency of globalization should be shed light on that the fundamental transformation of China society occurred in the sphere of social individualization and its ethic consequence, which means the modernization of ethics both for the governments and the citizens.

**Keywords:** Risk; Individualization; Ethic of accountability; Bureaucracy

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During the past four decades, it's quite obvious that the scale of China's economy had greatly expanded. At the end of 2010, China had become one of the biggest economy in the world, which only rank second to that of U.S, meanwhile China had also witnessed great challenges of modernity: transformation of social unit and individual ethics.

Although China's economic performance seemed overwhelming, the cost it had paid may be somehow immense: firstly, in order to develop local industry, since the late 1990s the natural environment of China's rural areas got seriously polluted; secondly, while economic or material interests meant more to common Chinese people, value, faith and even spiritual life seemed to lack attraction for them, thus the problem of ethic in public administration and social life became much emergent than before. Besides, due to rapid technological innovation of internet and global communication, especially those of AI, big data and block chain, complexity of the giant system of modern society became more and more unimaginable, thus Western Sociologists such as Ulrich Beck and Niklas Luhmann put forward the theory of "risk" and "Risk Sociology" in the context of post-industrial society.

Ethically, Max Weber's distinction in "Politics as a Vocation" between "the ethic of conviction" and "the ethic of accountability" can be understood as a distinction between mutually exclusive ethical worldviews. Besides the academic tradition of social theory, another narration should be treated seriously: since 1980s several American historians and cultural anthropologists such as Philip C.C. Huang and Prasenjit Duara put the conception of "involution" forward to describe the cultural and ethic dilemma encountered in the process of modernization for non-western civilized nations. Furthermore, in Huang's books and articles he tends to connect the involution of education with that of bureaucracy, which is instructive to research the problem of social individualization as a cultural mode and its risk to good governance for the society.

## 1. China's economic performance and challenges

### 1.1 The experience and cost of China's economic growth

Up to the end of 2010 China had become the second great economy in the world and surpassed Japan, who had kept the record since

1964. Since the dawn of New Era of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics on 2012, under industrious labour and powerful leadership China had witnessed rapid growth of GNP, which had aroused to the amount of \$ 13000. Obviously, the economical achievement of China's governance is overwhelmingly amazing, common Chinese people are also entitled to enjoy prosperity and decent lives.

Yet according to the prediction cited from the report of CCP's 19<sup>th</sup> Delegation Congress in 2017, the mainstream contradiction of China society had transformed from materialistic side to social, spiritual or inter-subjective side. Since of Hegel's most famous viewpoints on human beings' history was that he thought the Oriental world was the beginning of human's civilization, yet nowadays this viewpoint seems outdated: it's obvious that countries such as China and India have made immense progress in economic and social development, and generally this situation is embodied in the expanded scale macro-economy. And besides the average living standard of China people also saw great increase, from 2012 CPC and China government solved a series of poverty problems especially that of the rural population. However, with the slowdown of economic growth rate, the ecological and ethic costs they had paid became apparent and somehow immeasurable.

Firstly, in order to develop local industry, we devoted our natural resource and got our environment polluted to convert them into profit returns. Secondly, while materialistic stuffs meant more to common Chinese people, value and faith meant relatively less important. Owing to the deficit of traditional education and the absence of modern ethic of accountability, the function and enterprise focus of China's public sector were distorted in some extent, especially that of the national education bureaucratic system, as Louis Althusser had put, the state apparatus of ideology.

In general, in some extent China's troubles of governance once maybe included rampant corruption, bad debt of banks, unemployment, low proficiency in stated-owned enterprises and etc., which indicated the trend of social involution. As mentioned above, the theoretical paradigm was cited to interpret series of governance dilemmas of developing countries and traditional societies. How did these problems come into being, and what kind of influence can they produce on contemporary Chinese Macro-economic situation? Imaginably, the answers are complicated and systematic.

In this part the question to be dealt with is the ethic problem that lies in the social life. For example, since the last decade, more and more labour-intensified factories encounter the problem of employment. For millions of rural youths they would rather work as a takeaway or delivery courier than an assembly worker. As for the reason, it is said that the working pressure was too heavy to bear, which means the non-humane system of Ford pattern management led to the mental and even ethic crisis of grass-root people. Obviously, different modes of labour shape different work or career ethics and in general, the so-called gig economy was seen harmful for individualized workers themselves to the social capital that they could obtain.

## **1.2 Ethic of accountability: an academic introduction**

Almost 15 years before, a well-known economist of Chinese Taiwan, Larry Lang Xian-ping suggested that the current economic situation, especially inflation, actually arose because of political corruption and inefficiency. According to his opinions, owing to political corruption the interests of common enterprises cannot get well protected, and the risk of further investment is somehow unbearable. Thus a large amount of idle money gushed from the manufacture industries to the market of so-called FIRE (Finance, Insurance and Real Estate) economic department.

In succession, the bubbles appeared. However, according to some domestic scholars, in developing countries two kinds of political corruption existed, that is, the so-called "efficiency enhancing" and the "predatory" corruptions. It's argued that the "efficiency enhancing" corruption once seemed rampant in China. As for the latter, they took cases in Philippine for example. There is one basic difference between the two categories mentioned above: level of public trust.

Namely, public trust has been framed and forged during a long evolution process of informal networks among social, economic and political exchanges. Thus the so-called "trusting souls" and "unwritten law" count. China, as a nation state with over 5000 years' history of civilization, has a set of values system taken as "informal institutional arrangement", which is widely divergent with that of the West.

Weber's dualistic distinction in "Politics as a Vocation" between the ethic of "conviction" versus "responsibility" can be understood as a distinction among mutually exclusive ethical worldviews. Interpretations that correlate the two ethics within Weber's distinction between value-rational and instrumental-rational social action meant that the ethic of conviction recognizes a given hierarchy of values, while the ethic of accountability acknowledges value obligations, yet assumes the absence of any given hierarchy of values and the inevitability of value conflict. When interpreted in the context of his multi-layered understanding of value conflict, Weber's ethic of accountability emerged as a coherent ethical perspective.

To define the meaning of ethic of accountability in Weber's context and in contrast to both Kantian and Utilitarian views of ethics that rely on the existence of a priori knowledge or some universal standard, we assume a more naturalistic and pragmatic perspective.

Further, the concept of accountability can be approached analytically in three ways:historically, institutionally and sociologically.

Historically, the term itself has distinctly Anglican and feudalistic roots,that is,it has only recently emerged as a universal standard of governance.This point requires to get a macro eyesight on European culture and institutional history,especially that of the Middle Ages, not simply from the origin of Athenian democracy.

Institutionally,formalized means of feedback and control established with governance structures of states and corporate entities.This means,if without modern institution of national state, the administrative system will not coincide with the existing social structure efficiently.

Sociologically,as a type of social action that is part of a larger class of social processes or mechanisms, accountability can be dealt with the necessity to repair or overcome damaged relationships resulting from “unanticipated or untoward behavior”. Accountability has traditionally been regarded as the means used to control and direct administrative behavior by requiring “answerable” to some external authority.At the same time,Accountability mechanisms are also required to render the decisions and behavior of public officials responsible,not merely in the legal,political or bureaucratic senses of that term,but morally as well.Thus, the ethnic behavior requires the presence of external accountability mechanisms in various forms.

In the past decades China has witnessed overall social transformation both of structure and of function,which influenced every common Chinese people in the sense of subjective experience,thus led to the change of basic beliefs and sociologically meant the individualization of social structure and micro unit of good governance.Yet for all subsystems of modern social system according to Structural-functionalism,the transformation of ethics as a subsystem of latent model maintenance would be the most arduous and chronic.

## **2. Basic beliefs of traditional and contemporary China’s bureaucracy**

### **2.1 A brief introduction to China’s traditional economy and faith on it**

Generally the history of China had been unique compared to that of the West.So since the Enlightenment Era it had been argued that the geographic and bio-ecological environmental differences between China and Europe forged Chinese’s attitude toward economy,together with their values on life and society.According to a famous Chinese philosopher named Fung Yu-lan in 20<sup>th</sup> century,traditional Chinese tended to take different branches or departments of macro-economy as a whole that agriculture was concerned with production,while commerce was merely concerned with exchange and consumption,thus agriculture was thought as the “root” of the society and commerce as the “branch”,which should be strictly limited as to save resources.Therefore throughout Chinese history the conviction “to emphasize the root and slight the branch” shaped the ethic of agricultural rural society according to Weber’s dualistic distinction,until the invasion of western industrialized nations and capitals.

Since 1949,CCP obtained the victory of the great China Revolution by utterly mobilizing thousands of millions of the grass-root peasants in despairing poverty.The leader as a charisma of individual volition and mass movement,he believed that the means of mass movements could absolutely make greater progress in the field of industrialization and even modernization for the newly founded people’s republic.At that time, the philosophical-methodological base of Soviet-Union’s economic development model once accorded with the routine of CCP,which was considered as the tradition of value-rational defined by Max Weber.Thus,in order to ensure the economic policy to be carried out properly,a series of mass movements was launched to realize the ideal type for Communism by national education and charismatic worship,which unprecedentedly continued the ethic tradition of ancient China.

After the rising of the Second International and its Revisionists,one of main principles of Karl Marx’s classical struggle theories got distorted,which meant the economic determinism of mechanical materialism was cited to interpret human behaviour and history of social evolution.Although Lenin criticized the method in his research about imperialist Capitalism, nevertheless Joseph Stalin philosophically inherited the Determinism and put it forward to guide the industrialization route of Soviet Union.

In the year of 1956, especially after the 20<sup>th</sup> Delegation Congress of CCCP,out of the introspection against Soviet Union’s rapid industrialization route and policy,the bureaucracy-oriented command economy and its cost,China began to discover its unique route of modernization with Chinese characteristics independently.Despite the enthusiasm aspired by revolution ideology,the laws of state-capital accumulation and extension couldn’t be neglected and overcome,according to a research about China’s process of industrial revolution,the spark of China’s fundamental transformation wasn’t ignited until the dawn of Reform and Opening Policy,with enable the ancient but young republic emerged with a new circle of geo-politics and global business booming.

### **2.2 Why did political decisions once surpassed economic ones in China?**

In an article named “From Smith to Karl Menger to Hayek:Liberalism in the Spontaneous Order Tradition”,the author supplied a developmental view-sight about the deep-roots of economical history of China.That is, what kind of reason lies in the process of the formula or regulation of human activities that come into being?

On one side it’s insisted that the argument between rationalism and empiricism count.On the other side, only if researchers

deeply dive into cultural, philosophical and political traditions and realities of China, can they understand that the political factors as the subsystem of goal-attainment in dialectical sense are superior to other subsystem. Thanks to Chinese's natural inclination to prefer rationalism philosophically, the great revolution led by the CCP as a result was the aftermath of the combination of Marxism-Leninism and traditional Chinese political theories, yet once failed to solve the problem of China's economic growth before 1970s.

Based on theoretical tradition created by Lenin, on the phenomena of political superiority and its aftermath, in contrast some viewpoints of the New Institutionalism have the meanings of illumination. According to the scholarship, "Institution changes in developed areas fully values the spontaneous institutional initiative of the masses and permit the diversity of institution arrangements; the government should loosen up on the limitations of China Private Economy (CPE)'s inner initiation of finance institution, and it's very important to properly break through the government's policy's bounds at the right moment and offer the relevant institution supply." Hereby, contrary to the planned economy, even during the hardest time, there are always individual economic movements in grass-root level which stubbornly existed as the so-called little tradition, the micro-level condition and governance unit of the Reform and Opening policy became available.

In face of China's contemporary success in economy, many people may be likely to owe a lot to the right policies fulfilled the spirit of laissez-faire by CCP, and the entrepreneurship aroused among thousands of millions of common Chinese people. Yet, nowadays it has bottle-necked in front of kinds of conditionality: ethic transformation generated from economic and social transformation meant the rebuilt of social system and governance units.

### **3. Overcoming individualization: China's self-orientation in the decadency of globalization**

#### **3.1 The inner impact of China's overall rising**

Whether admitted or not, the international economic systems of contemporary world in fact are controlled by trans-national monopoly corporations and capitals. Those points of view such as "challenge and opportunity" may be seen as kind of cliché, yet if China were to be rejected by the West in the coming race-to-bottom competition, both sides would be double-losers. In some extent emerge of a problem, that is, for China's part means how to perform well both at economic independence and the merge into globalization and its value chain. And, this by no means is equal to economic nationalism.

According to the status quo of China's economy, especially that of industry, how could China struggle for successfully carving out its own way? It's argued that the combination of the experience of China's own history and other Asian countries with universal economical rules. Japan once was a good example. However, due to the difference between China and Japan, the model that China is likely to follow for certain will be dissimilar with that of Japan and other Asian countries. Tracing back to China's history and the experience of carrying out the Reform and Opening policy, researchers will find that in China gradual and chronic reforms have always been more feasible than Japan's radical version. With determination and courage the author tends to believe that China has good opportunity to break a new path of industrialization by carrying out more institutional reforms and create a peaceful developmental environment, which has been summarized as "Modernization of Chinese model" according to the report of 20<sup>th</sup> Delegation Congress of CCP.

#### **3.2 China's up-to-date reform of bureaucracy against the risk society**

Since 2012, the importance and necessity of fighting political corruption and enhancing institutional reform were stressed for many times and theoretically summarized as the second weapon for overcoming the periodic law of Chinese history. Compared to the so-called first weapon of people's democracy, the author prefers to take this for a signal of China leader's further consciousness about economic and social reforms. Considering the complicated domestic situation of China and the difference between China and the West, China has reason to act on its own will and further political and social reforms at its own pace. In the report of the Congress, the reforms of education-technology-talent was highlighted unprecedentedly and a new develop path was put forward: innovation-driven development not the old-style factor-driven one.

Early in this century, since the agricultural tax was decide to be exempted, over the late decade new policies on rural education and medical treatment also get issued for enforcement, the peasants' living standard get greatly promoted. Meanwhile remarkable changes had taken place in Chinese countryside. Upon these progress it can be assured that only these basic problems of people's livelihood get fully resolved, can we expect further reform on basic social and even political institutions and mechanisms which are also critical for China's overall reforms.

Originated from the experience of industrialized process of the Western world, many Western authors concluded that China's economy would soon collapse because of the rampant corruption, economical or financial bubbles and clash of foreign capital. While having Survived out of the challenge originated by the 2008 world financial crisis, China remains a giant and healthy economy and still activates as an engine of world economy.

As whole, history itself somehow seems random. Whether China would survive and thrive throughout recent crises such as the global pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war, modern economical factors have been absorbed in China's society, and cause considerable changes in the antique but newly born industrialized country. Hereby the author believes China have enough reasons to blaze a brand-new trail in its economical and political development.

Since the end of 2019, a newly launched democratic campaign with typical Chinese characteristics named as the Whole Process People's Democracy, which was seen quite different with that of Western liberal democracy in definition and practice. Namely, the so-called "democratic talk in all sincerity" has already transited from the originally political work of improving and enhancing the rural ideology and politics at the basic level and the carrier of ideological and political work aimed at improving relation between the cadres and the masses to a new form of building of democracy at the grass-roots level which starts from democratic governance.

Facing the outcome of modernization, the rise of individualistic market-society and its harm to traditional rural community, China's rural democratic construction at the basic level made it impossible to give play to the demonstration effect as a kind of mature political and democratic form about citizen education with which it can influence. By probing and summarizing the experience of democratic construction conscientiously in a situation that political obstruction is relatively small, people would manage to form the atmosphere of democratic culture, propagate basic idea of democracy and train individuals to raise democratic consciousness by a large scale, which is indispensable for the formation of ethic of accountability for modern citizen.

## Conclusion:

On this point the author cannot find more excuses to be against Carl Schmidt's judgment: political is resolution. Since the ultra characteristics of Chinese secular civilization is macrocosm based on ancient philosophy and modern ideology, thus we cannot either entirely neglect this essence of civilization which naturally decide the ethic model of common Chinese people.

Although frustrated in some extent since the 2008 financial crisis, globalization of economy can be still defined as world-wide integration of finance, production and consumption will be one of the most outstanding phenomena as well at the post-pandemic era. Generally, globalization should be seen as a motor of powerful economic growth and offers perspectives of betterment of international welfare as before. Recent developments in various parts of the world show that new dangers characterize the present situation. Just when global production and consumption is spreading, so it is with inequality, destruction of environment, community and people's solidarity. Global networks are restricted largely to the countries of the Triad thus marginalizing the greater part of the world. And what's worse, global production and consumption on one hand is accompanied by rising nationalism, ethnic and religious fundamentalism on the other side.

That is, the most crucial consequence of globalization is that it gives rise to "mismanaged world competition", which may jeopardize the independence of individual citizens and influence the solidarity of international community. This situation needs more endeavour to solve by the corporation and coordination of all the countries and organizations in the planet.

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