

Short Article

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Focus of My Research

Along with the fast economic development, many institutions have been established to solve conflicts by supplying the rules of game. As a consequence, Chinese people, not only officers but also common citizens, are facing stronger regulation. Nevertheless, institutional regulation does not work well since behaviors against rules often happen. A quantity of formal rules has been eroded. In other words, Chinese government is facing a serious dilemma: more and more rules have been created but it seems not effective enough to deal with conflicts. This may obstruct Chinese sustainable development.

Besides China, many other developing countries are also confused by the same problem. During the past few years, western countries have been transplanting their institutions to developing countries. However, several examples show that institutional transplantation does not lead to the anticipated outcome: creating modern democracy and maintaining social order. That is to say institutions of developed countries are always less effective to developing countries. This is also a primary question confusing the researchers of Politics in western countries.

The objective of this research is to find the underlying reasons and solutions to the question why institutions do not work well in developing countries, based on China as a case study.

Theoretical Framework

Definition of Institution

The first and most important question I encountered during research is: what is an institution? Douglass C. North defined institutions as the rules of game in a society which constitute main constraints shaping human interaction (1990). In Friedrich A. Hayek's view, institution is equal to the meaning of order. Meanwhile, Ronald Coase regards institution as a structural arrangement or configuration.

No uniform definition of institution exists in institutional study. Some researchers define institutions as the formal or informal procedures, routines, norms and conventions embedded in the organizational structure of the polity or political economy. This kind of definition combines institutions with formal organizations and the rules or conventions used by them. Some others tend to extend the meaning of institutions broadly by including not just formal rules, procedures or norms, but the symbol systems, cognitive scripts, and moral templates which provide the 'frames of meaning' guiding human action (Peter A. Hall & Rosemary C. R. Taylor, 1996).

Now we know that the word "institution" is used loosely in political science to mean everything from a formal structure like a parliament to very amorphous entities like social class. Other components of the socio-political universe such as laws and markets are also described as institutions (Teubner, 1986; Robinson, 1991). Thus, there is no definite and uniform definition of institution till now. According to the research topic, institution here only includes formal rules of game in a society. Institutional capacity refers to government's capacity to create, execute and improve rules.

Three Prospective Theoretical Approaches

The origins of political science are from the study of institutions. But they were rejected by

the discipline of political science during the post-Second World War period, especially in the United States, and replaced by two theoretical approaches based more on individualistic assumptions: behavioralism and rational choice. (B.Guy Peters, 2005) These two approaches assume that individuals are all rational actors since individuals' preferences are exogenous and permanent. Due to the development of behavioralism and rational choice theory, the study of institutions had been ignored until institutional study revitalized in 1980s being called New Institutionalism.

New Institutionalism includes three approaches according to Hall and Taylor's analysis: historical institutionalism, rational choice institutionalism and sociological institutionalism (Peter A. Hall & Rosemary C.R. Taylor, 1996).

The basic hypothesis of historical institutionalism is that the conflicts for scarce resources among different interest groups are essential in political process. Based on their analysis, it is the institutional differences which lead to variant political outcomes in different countries. Rational choice institutionalism assumes that political actors are all rational economic men with intrinsic preferences and driven by self-interest. In order to maximize self-interest, institutions are created by related actors. However, researchers of sociological institutionalism criticize this point of view, especially the point how to explain institutional homogenization. They argue that it is not rational calculation but cultural background that brings out institutional homogenization. Although these three approaches have different hypotheses and conclusions, they share the same three basic assumptions: political actors' limited rationality, institutional path dependency and the effects of concepts.



Weiwei at final presentation

Preliminary Findings

Unfinished Transformation With fast economic development of more than 30 years, China has become the second largest economy in the world. But an important fact is that China is still in transformation process and a number of institutions are being developed due to reforms. Consequently, many fundamental institutions (rules, policies...) change frequently to some extent, which decreases institutions' validity.

Various Conflicts Conflicts in modern China are so various that they cannot be solved with one single standard. This means one formal institution may not fit another case though it fixed one case successfully which also decreases institutions' validity. It results in dangerous consequences: citizens' similar requests cannot be treated in the same ways sometimes. And then social equity and the foundation of governmental credibility are impaired seriously.

China is now at the crossroad of development. In order to keep continuing development, how to improve institutional capacity during transformation period has become one of crucial tasks of Chinese central government.