



## The Governance Discourse in China

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## **The Governance Discourse in China**

*Isabella Goikhman and Barbara Herrmann*

### **Abstract**

In recent years, the increasingly important role of China and the reforms pursued by the Chinese government have been major topics of interest for political scientists. However, the emergence of governance discourse in China has largely been ignored. By analyzing this discourse, this paper has the following aims: (1) to introduce the emergence of Chinese discourse within the context of other discourses on political reforms, singling out the dominant concept of governance; (2) to examine various views held by Chinese scholars concerning the adoption of the concept; and (3) to address the question of its political relevance.

### **Zusammenfassung**

Die wachsende Bedeutung und die politischen Reformen Chinas standen in den letzten Jahren im Fokus der politikwissenschaftlichen Chinaforschung. Der innerchinesische Governance-Diskurs ist dabei größtenteils nicht beachtet worden. Der Artikel verfolgt mit der Analyse dieses Diskurses folgende Ziele: (1) das Aufzeigen der Entstehung des Governance-Diskurses im Kontext anderer Reformdiskurse und die Identifizierung eines innerhalb dieser Diskurse dominanten Governance-Begriffes; (2) die Analyse von Sichtweisen verschiedener chinesischer Diskursteilnehmer auf das Governance-Konzept im Hinblick auf dessen Adaptierung im nationalen Kontext und (3) die Klärung der Frage nach der politischen Relevanz des Governance-Diskurses.

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## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

“China to launch new round of reform for good governance,” proclaimed the headline of a report by the Chinese government news agency Xinhua on October 16, 2010. Good governance is the goal of the comprehensive political and economic reforms outlined within the framework of the 12th Five-Year Plan (2011-2015).<sup>2</sup> After fifteen years of debate among Chinese scholars, governance has finally arrived in Chinese politics.

Along with China’s increasingly important position in world politics, the Chinese government’s efforts to introduce reforms and the consequences of economic reform for the economic system have become major topics of interest for political science research on China in recent years (Heberer/Senz 2009: 307). In the field of international relations, Chinese perspectives on global governance are now attracting more and more attention (Wang/Rosenau 2009), but few studies related to Chinese concepts of governance in the national context have as yet been carried out in Western-language political science research on China.

Although the term “governance” first appeared in research on China in non-Chinese languages ten years ago, there has been little discussion of the international governance discourse or the specific semantic content of the Chinese term for governance. Without reflection, the so-called broad definition of the term “governance,” which refers to “any form of social order” (Risse 2008: 150), has been adopted wholesale.<sup>3</sup> The situation recalls the early years of political science research on governance: the term “governance” was generally used as a synonym for “government” or “governing” (Sigley 2006: 9).

In the Chinese discourse, the term most often used to refer to governance, *zhili* (治理), is applicable not only to governing in general, but also to a particular form of governing: namely, a strategy for implementing government reforms. In contrast to the term *tongzhi* (统治), which is used to refer to the traditional, hierarchical form of governing, *zhili* is characterized by the non-hierarchical collaboration of state and society where the aim is to work together to find solutions to the problems that have arisen in China as a result of the wide-ranging economic reforms. This narrow definition of the term “governance” applies only to those forms of governing that are characterized by a cooperative style, in which private stakeholders participate (Risse 2008: 150).

<sup>1</sup> This is a revised and extended version of the article “Governance-Diskurs in der Volksrepublik China”, in *Berliner Debatte Initial*, 22: 4 (2011): 118-129. We would like to thank Prof. Mechthild Leutner and Prof. Michael Daxner for their valuable stimulation and support.

<sup>2</sup> “China to launch new round of reform for good governance”, in: [http://www.china.org.cn/china/2010-10/16/content\\_21137335.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/china/2010-10/16/content_21137335.htm); last accessed December 9, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Howell (2004: 2), where governance is defined “as the totality of processes and arrangements both formal and informal, by which power and public authority are distributed and regulated.”

The analysis of the Chinese governance discourse presented in this paper was carried out in pursuance of the following aims:

- 1) To present the genesis of the Chinese governance discourse within its contextual reference framework in other discourses on political development, and to map out the dominant governance concept in the Chinese discourse;
- 2) To describe the different views of various Chinese scholars with regard to the adoption and indigenization of the governance concept that has developed outside China;
- 3) To discuss the question of the relevance of governance discourse for Chinese policymakers, taking into consideration institutional linkages and discursive interweavings.

## 2. Genesis and characteristics of the Chinese governance discourse

In the view of many Chinese researchers, the report by the World Bank in 1992 entitled “Governance and Development” – translated into Chinese and published in China – served as a launching pad for the governance discourse in China.<sup>4</sup> At that time, some economists started to look at corporate governance issues, and political scientists started to examine good governance (He 2003: 295; Sigley 2006: 12; Yu 2002b: 194). The first Chinese publication that dealt with the governance concept appeared in 1995 (Wei 2009: 45; Zhi 1995). In the same year, the first meeting was held on “global governance” – an aspect of the governance debate that has also been driven forward in China by reports from important international organizations, such as the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the United Nations Education, Science and Culture Organization (UNESCO) (Wang/Rosenau 2009: 11; Wang 1995).

The interest of the Chinese in the governance concept can be seen in the context of the broader debates on political reform that have taken place since the end of the 1970s. The changes that have occurred in world politics and within China since the end of the 1980s have led to the intensification, reorientation, and differentiation of these debates. The collapse of the Soviet Union at the beginning of the 1990s called into question the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) within China and, on the global level, marked the reorientation of international politics that became necessary after the end of the Cold War. New global problems, such as terrorism and financial crises, have emerged, and only with the cooperation of all stakeholders will solutions to these be found.

On the domestic front, the CCP found itself facing a governability crisis. Although the economic reforms carried out since the early 1980s had yielded the desired results, there were also serious, unintended consequences that threatened the social order: spatial and social polarization, corruption, problems in the provision of medical care and education services, deterioration of the housing situation, social insecurity, problems linked to the environment and resources, and

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<sup>4</sup> Not only with regard to China is the World Bank attributed the central role in disseminating and establishing the governance concept. It has been referred to as a “birthing aid” for the governance paradigm. See Nuscheler (2009: 15).

the collapse of the social system. These problems had serious repercussions for the rule of the CCP and the party's claim to legitimacy.<sup>5</sup>

The need for political reforms to accompany the economic development became obvious. This sparked a wide-ranging debate in political circles and among researchers that focused on finding solutions to the problems linked to the economic reforms and the modernization processes. Given that social problems and dissatisfaction were increasing in spite of the steps already taken, finding solutions for specific problems became more important than defending ideologies.<sup>6</sup>

In the early 1990s, in the search for new approaches to political reform, the CCP commissioned Chinese scholars to study the experience of other countries with the aim of learning how to prevent problems from arising in the future. The adoption of foreign concepts and the introduction of foreign practices were not, however, intended to proceed uncritically. Selected ideas were to be adopted and adapted in the process described by David Shambaugh as “selective borrowing” (Shambaugh 2008: 296).

Western language research on China has focused mainly on questions related to democratization and civil society,<sup>7</sup> but alternative models of political development have been subject to debate in China for years.<sup>8</sup> These models are consistent with the party agenda and do not have a negative effect on Communist Party rule; rather, they allow it to function more effectively and more sustainably by instituting changes in structures and institutions, and have found acceptance with the Chinese government. Governance is one of these concepts.<sup>9</sup>

Governance drew the attention of Chinese scholars and politicians for three main reasons:

First, as a result of globalization and domestic transformation processes, China was experiencing problems similar to those for which the governance concept, which had emerged in various fields of politics as a reaction to the failure of the state and the market, seemed to offer solutions. The Chinese government and Chinese scholars sought alternative concepts of governing to replace the traditional concepts that were no longer working. Governance, according to

5 For the dilemmas of rule and legitimacy, see, for example, Schubert (2006).

6 This is the difference between the political debates that have taken place since the 1990s and those that took place in the 1980s. The 1980s discourse described as “Culture Fever” (*wenhuare* 文化热) took place mainly on the meta-level of different theories and “isms,” such as Marxism, existentialism, Freudianism. See Xu (2009: 36). Discussions did not focus on questions related to the application of these theories to policy. For a detailed discussion of “Culture Fever,” see Wu (1988), Geist (1996), Chen/Jin (1997).

7 See, for example, Heberer/Senz (2009).

8 For example, constitutionalism, incremental democracy, and dynamic stability.

9 The disciplinary roots of the governance concept are found, on the one hand, in the institution's economics, and, on the other, in sub-areas of political science in international relations and policy research. In addition, the creation of the term “good governance” by the World Bank was decisive for the spread of the concept. See Benz et al. (2007: 10f), Schuppert (2008: 16).

Western researchers, would be more efficient and more effective than other traditional forms of state control.<sup>10</sup>

Second, the governance model allegedly offers practical – more efficient and more profitable – ways of solving problems. Furthermore, as a political development model, it does not call into question the existing system of rule, unlike the democratization model that is often postulated by other countries. Being problem-oriented, the governance concept is attractive for Chinese intellectuals who focus mainly on finding solutions to specific problems, and also for the Chinese government, whose claim to legitimacy is strengthened by a reputation for good problem-solving skills.

Third, with regard to the relationship between the state and society, the governance concept offers points of contact for the various participants in the Chinese discourse. From the perspective of the Chinese government and the New Left,<sup>11</sup> governance is seen as a state-organized means of easing the burden on the state, which, by involving non-government stakeholders in public action, extends the scope of government action and thus contributes to strengthening the state and consolidating the system of rule. Chinese liberals, on the other hand, see the governance concept as offering opportunities to outbid the need for hierarchical state intervention through autonomous social self-regulation.<sup>12</sup>

These three factors combined to awaken the interest of Chinese scholars and politicians in the governance concept, which rapidly gained wide currency. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the governance concept has enjoyed increasing popularity with Chinese researchers: In 1997, only one essay with the key words “governance” and *zhili* (治理, the Chinese language equivalent) was listed in the China Academic Journals Full-Text Database.<sup>13</sup> Five years later there were 233, and by 2010, the number of essays listed had increased to 1,210 (see Figure 1). In addition to well-known experts such as Yu Keping, who played a key role in promoting governance theory in China (Sun et al. 2008: 51; Wei 2009: 45), many junior researchers have also addressed the topic. The broad interest in governance is also evidenced by the increasing

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<sup>10</sup> For Western research on governance, see von Blumenthal (2005: 1163).

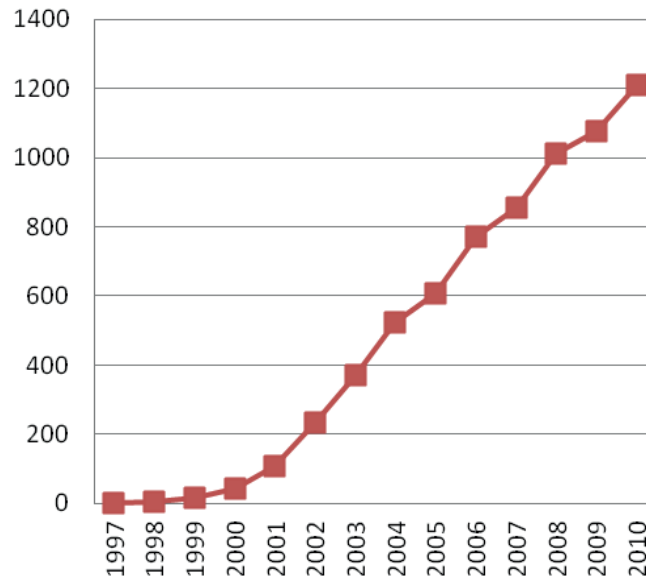
<sup>11</sup> In the 1990s, Chinese intellectuals could be seen as divided into two camps: the so-called “New Left” (*xinzuopai* 新左派) and the Liberals (*ziyouzhuyi* 自由主义). Both camps had different views on almost all political, economic, social, and cultural issues. While the “New Left” opposed the market economy and (global) capitalism, focused on overcoming social injustice, and emphasized the need for a strong state to control the market, the Liberals saw the market as a natural, self-regulating, spontaneous arrangement that was essential for social and political stability and would foster democracy. See Davies (2007), Xu (2009: 38f), Wei (2009), Li He (2010). Even today, however, the two camps have one fundamental characteristic in common: although they are critical of the government, they seek to achieve political reforms within the existing system. See Li He (2010: 4).

<sup>12</sup> For two perspectives on the relationship between state intervention and social autonomy, see Offe (2009: 555f).

<sup>13</sup> The China Academic Journals Full-Text Database (*Zhongguo qikan quanwen shujuku* 中国期刊全文数据库) is the most comprehensive full-text database of Chinese journals in the world. It contains articles in a diverse range of disciplines from 7,200 journals. The collection focuses on journals published since 1994. See <http://china.eastview.com/kns50/Navigator.aspx?ID=CJFD>; last accessed 15 April 2011.



numbers of related essays found in so-called “core journals,”<sup>14</sup> as well as in the publications of smaller provincial universities.<sup>15</sup>



**Figure 1:** Number of essays with the keywords “governance” and “zhili” in the China Academic Journals Full-text Database, as of 15 April 2011.

The Chinese Social Science Citation Index shows the diverse range of disciplines to which these publications belong: politics, economics and law, philosophy, social sciences and Marxism. As is the case in Western discourses, the fields of application are subsumed under the headings of “sectoral,” “corporate,” and “public/administrative” governance.<sup>16</sup>

Chinese research on governance is still in the primary stage of the appropriation process. The selection and reshaping of the appropriated is taking place, but the new knowledge is only seldom framed in its own argumentative strategies. The majority of the essays simply present the topic of governance (Sun et al. 2008: 50f) – but this is typical for this stage of the appropriation process.<sup>17</sup> In contrast to Western researchers, who have long employed the term “gover-

<sup>14</sup> For example, *Zhexue yanjiu* (哲学研究 Philosophical Research), *Zhengzhixue yanjiu* (政治学研究 CASS Journal of Political Science), *Beijing daxue xuebao* (北京大学学报 Peking University Editorial), *Shehui kexue* (社会科学 Social Science), *Heilongjiang shehui kexue* (黑龙江社会科学 Heilongjiang Social Sciences), *Jiangnan shehui xueyuan xuebao* (江南社会学院学报 Journal of Jiangnan Social University), *Zhengzhi yu falü* (政治与法律 Political Science and Law).

<sup>15</sup> See the Chinese Social Science Citation Index (CSSCI-Index): <http://cssci.nju.edu.cn>; last accessed October 22, 2012.

<sup>16</sup> “Sectoral governance” (*bumen zhili* 部门治理) refers to governance in different political sectors, such as environmental politics, energy politics, health politics and educational politics. “Corporate governance” (*gongsi zhili* 公司治理) seeks efficient company management and sets regulations for social and environmental standards. “Public/administrative governance” (*gonggong zhili* 公共治理/*xingzheng guanli* 行政管理 or *xingzhengxing zhili* 行政型治理) is concerned with the improvement of bureaucratic processes, responsiveness to the public, and the participation of social actors.

<sup>17</sup> For intercultural transfer processes, see Muhs et al. (1998).

nance” for both descriptive and analytical purposes, only a few Chinese researchers have used the added methodological value of the new concept to analyze the socio-political changes that lead to non-hierarchical forms of cooperation between state and non-state stakeholders, or to carry out a systematic assessment of the forms of cooperation.<sup>18</sup> Now, however, a uniform Chinese term for governance has emerged in various contexts: *zhili* (治理). Previously, in particular at the end of the 1990s, several terms could be found in circulation: *xiandai zhidao* (现代治道 modern governing), *zhidao* (治道 governing) and also *guan zhi* (管制 control)<sup>19</sup>. A uniform term, however, does not lead to a uniform definition of the thing denoted by “governance” or “*zhili*”. From a linguistic perspective, *zhili* is a successful translation of “governance” that retains the ambiguity of the English term and can be used to refer to a specific form of governing as well as to governing in general.

Although Chinese scholars are aware of the various shades of meaning that accrue to “governance,” they generally refrain from defining the term.<sup>20</sup> Chinese researchers on governance, like their Western counterparts, find themselves confronted with the argument that governance is a container term with only vague meaning and therefore cannot be used for scientific research. In 1998, for example, Bob Jessop underlined the problems associated with the use of the term “governance” in the Western context, pointing out that “it has enjoyed a remarkable revival during the last fifteen years or so in many contexts, however, becoming a ubiquitous ‘buzzword’ which can mean anything or nothing.” (Jessop 1998: 30) In 2009, Wei Chonghui quoted Jessop in order to draw attention to the problems facing Chinese researchers on governance (Wei 2009: 45).

In the context of political science, despite the lack of any uniform definition of the term, a number of important characteristics of governance have been identified that can be seen as typical of the Chinese governance discourse.<sup>21</sup> Governance is represented as a governing ideal, worth striving for, notable for the multi-polarity and horizontal relationships of the various

<sup>18</sup> One exception is Yan Jirong, who employed the governance concept to analyze the development of the Chinese political system. See Yan (2006). Yu Jianxing and Lü Mingzai also see governance as offering a new analysis framework for the changing relationships between the state and society. See Yu/Lü (2003). For an analysis of the Western governance discourse, see, for example, Nuscheler (2009: 8f).

<sup>19</sup> This term was (and sometimes still is) used in economics: *gongsi guan zhi* (公司管制), meaning corporate governance.

<sup>20</sup> Works on “good governance” constitute an exception in which scholars generally preface their remarks with a reference to a catalogue of characteristics compiled by Yu Keping: legitimacy (*hefaxing* 合法性), transparency (*toumingxing* 透明性), responsibility (*zerenxing* 责任性), rule of law (*fazhi* 法治), responsiveness (*huiying* 回应) and effectiveness (*youxiao* 有效). See Yu (2000: 9ff).

<sup>21</sup> These characteristics are common to all governance discourses, regardless of their relation to different political-territorial levels – local governance (*difang zhili* 地方治理), regional governance (*diqu zhili* 地区治理), national governance (*guojia zhili* 国家治理) and global governance (*diqu zhili* 地球治理). See Xia (2010). For Western governance research, Offe summarizes common constants as “institutionalized, if often ‘informal’ modes of interaction, in which the participants cooperate in a conscious and goal-oriented manner, while not exclusively pursuing their own interests, but also the common concerns of the members of a political community (or a large corporation). These, in turn, cannot be promoted (or at least not exclusively and in an efficient and effective way) through hierarchical sovereign action by the state and according to the model of command/threat, of coercion/obedience, which are the classical forms of sovereign action.” See Offe (2009: 553).

stakeholders involved. The particularity of the Chinese governance concept lies in its emphasis on the dominant role of one actor, the government,<sup>22</sup> in the governance processes.

*a) (Good) Governance as a governing ideal that is worth striving for<sup>23</sup>*

Considering the discursive context in which Chinese research on governance is embedded, there is nothing surprising about this first characteristic of the governance concept, which was, after all, introduced as one of the possible alternative political development models to solve existing problems. The diagnosis of the periodical failure of hierarchical state-led modes of governing served as the basis for the emergence of the governance concept, so that in both the West and in China, the normative preference for non-hierarchical forms of cooperation as opposed to hierarchies in the term “governance” is immanent.<sup>24</sup> Governance is portrayed as a new, progressive notion of governing and set against the traditional notions of governing that are characterized by the hierarchical control of the state (*tongzhi* 统治). It has also been described as more profitable and more efficient than traditional forms of governing by the state (Dai 2002: 22; Hang/Pei 2007: 35; Hu 2002: 44f; Li Kai 2010: 44; Yan 2004: 23f; Yu 2000: 5f; 2002b: 194).<sup>25</sup>

Governance, it is claimed, has the potential to resolve current contradictions in Chinese society (Xue/Li 2007; Yu 2000: 5f). Governance is a model of good governing<sup>26</sup> that can be adopted in certain areas of government reform in China (Shen/Zhou 2003: passim). “Good governance” (*shanzhi* 善治) is represented as the ideal system of social order (Fan 2007: 19; Guo 2010: 159; Hang/Pei 2007: 35) and also as the guiding principle that is essential for the development of a harmonious society<sup>27</sup> (Hang/Pei 2007: 35; Li Kai 2010: 44).

<sup>22</sup> In the context of China, the government is equated with the Communist Party. As a one-party system, the executive bodies of the party are at the top of the hierarchical political system; see Heilmann (2004: 38). Even in the governance discourse, the CCP and the government are seldom named as independent governance actors. The equation of the government with the party can be seen as a further indication that the participants in the governance discourse are not seeking to change the existing political system into a multiparty system along the lines of those found in Western democracies.

<sup>23</sup> The *realpolitik* weakening of the term to “good enough” governance, meaning that it fulfills “minimal conditions of governance necessary to allow political and economic development to occur” (Grindle 2004: 526), does not play a role in the Chinese discourse.

<sup>24</sup> For the Western discourse, see Haus (2010: 460).

<sup>25</sup> The comparison of governance and government was also widespread in the early phase of governance research, above all in the initial stage of its development, but governance then developed in demarcation to government. There are now two strands to Western research: one sees the term “governance” as an antonym for the term “government” and the other sees the term “governance” as an umbrella term covering both hierarchical and non-hierarchical forms, including “government,” Benz et al. (2007: 13), Offe (2009: 551f), Zürn (2008: 554).

<sup>26</sup> Governance is also often considered a model for “good governing” in the Western discourse; see Benz et al. (2007: 15). This impression is strengthened by the wide variety of positive attributes found in descriptions of governance, such as, “non-corrupt, transparent, informal, citizen friendly, [...] legitimate, efficient, responsible, collective goods producing, effective, common good oriented, horizontal, problem-adequate and participatory.” See Offe (2009: 557).

<sup>27</sup> For the interweaving of the governance discourse with the discourse on the harmonious society, see Part 4 of this paper.

Here, the lack of a strict dividing line between governance (*zhili*) and good governance (*shanzhi*) becomes apparent. The two terms are often used interchangeably.

*b) Multi-polarity*

Governance stands for the renunciation of a centralized model in favor of a multi-polar collaboration model. In the latter, power is distributed among the various social stakeholders who, together, bear responsibility for the provision of public goods. The government is no longer the only center of power. The stakeholders include citizens, civil society, interest groups, the government, and NGOs (Fan 2007: 19f; Guo 2010: 159; Hang/Pei 2007; Li Fenghua 2003: 45; Shen/Zhou 2003: 5; Wang 2010: 96f; Wei 2009: 46). In this context, there has also been mention of a lean government with limited power (Hang/Pei 2007: 35; Mao 2001: 44; Xia 2010: 126).

*c) Collaboration in the form of horizontal relationships*

The majority of Chinese authors contend that the collaboration of the various stakeholders evolves via top-down and bottom-up mutual steering processes through cooperation, negotiations, and networking. Problem-solving capabilities can be enhanced through the cooperation of different stakeholders.<sup>28</sup> The complementary and horizontal power relations contribute to improved efficiency in the provision of public services oriented towards the common good, for which all stakeholders bear responsibility (Fan 2007: 19; Guo 2010: 159; Hu 2002: 45; Huang/Li 2002: 135; Li Fenghua 2003: 45; Mao 2001; Shen/Zhou 2003: 6; Xia 2010: 126f; Yu 1999: 38; 2000: 5f; 2002b: 145).

These factors, considered together, show the prevalence of the so-called narrow definition of the term “governance” in the Chinese governance discourse: governance as only those forms of steering in which the collaboration between state actors and private actors – rather than the decisions made by the hierarchical state – takes center position (von Blumenthal 2005: 1153f). The “broad” concept that encompasses hierarchical and non-hierarchical forms in the management of interdependencies (von Blumenthal 2005: 1154; Schuppert 2008: 24) is of key importance for Western researchers, but not taken into account in the Chinese debate.

A further characteristic of the Chinese term for governance illustrates the basic difference between the Western discourse and the discourse in China:

*d) The special role of the government in governance processes*

Despite the emphasis on developing multi-polarity and non-hierarchical forms of cooperation between state and non-state stakeholders to find solutions to specific problems, the special role played by the government in governance processes is underlined: the government is the initiator, the driving force, and the leader. A form of meta-governance is required under government leadership to steer the governance processes (Fan 2007: 19f; Yin 2007; Yu/He 2010: 3f; Yu 2002b: 195; Zou 2005). Even on the international stage, Chinese representatives call for a leading stakeholder – the United Nations – to play a special role (Wang/Rosenau 2009: 13f).

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<sup>28</sup> For the Western discourse, see von Blumenthal (2005: 1157).

This governance concept with Chinese characteristics seeks to achieve functional reforms within the existing system of rule. The government or the party continues to play the leading role. This is seen as proof that the state has the ability to adapt to social and economic changes. As a consequence, the governance discourse has been integrated into a number of political discourses in China that aim to perfect “socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics” while at the same time recognizing the pluralization of social actors and demands for the creation of democratic structures, such as participation.<sup>29</sup>

Although the emphasis on the role of the government is specific to the Chinese context, the governance discourse has been criticized domestically for its lack of specific analysis and debate. Chinese governance researchers give the impression that the theory of governance can be effectively implemented in China without any difficulty – a false conclusion in the view of some Chinese scholars, who have demanded a comprehensive debate on the theory of the governance concept and its indigenization (Sun et al. 2008: 55; Wei 2009: 45f).

### 3. Governance in the Chinese Context

The difficulties linked to the indigenization of the governance concept mirror the fundamental dilemma confronting Chinese intellectuals in all discourses on political reform: on the one hand, the government and the intellectuals themselves have shown that they favor the trend towards learning from developments in the West and adopting Western concepts.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, the CCP has underlined the special “Chinese way,” and the adoption of Western ideas is seen by many intellectuals as irreconcilable with Chinese culture, tradition, and the specific situation.

In the debate on Western concepts, Chinese scholars can be divided into three groups: the universalists, the cultural nationalists, and the cultural relativists.<sup>31</sup> The universalists base their argument on the universal validity of political concepts, such as democracy, and trace the ineffectiveness of the political reforms in China back to weaknesses, such as nepotism and corruption, found in Chinese cultural traditions (Derichs et al. 2004: 152). This group is not specifically represented within the governance discourse. The high number of essays that present the governance concept without referring to the Chinese context could be interpreted as a deliberate strategy to impart the universality of the theory to the reader. The universalists do not, however, adopt a specific universalist position.

<sup>29</sup> For a precise analysis of this strand in the Chinese discourses on political reform, see Derichs et al. (2004: 50ff).

<sup>30</sup> This was clarified in a statement by Hu Jintao on December 30, 2005: “Fresh experiences during the Party building process should be carefully summarized, and helpful practices of foreign political parties should be studied and borrowed from to enrich and develop the CCP’s governance theories,” quoted in Shambaugh (2008: 283).

<sup>31</sup> It is not always possible to make a clear distinction between the cultural nationalists and the cultural relativists. In their arguments, scholars can adopt cultural relativist and cultural nationalist positions at the same time.



The representatives of the cultural nationalist strand of the discourse start with the assumption that China needs its own political development and that this must be Chinese, both culturally and institutionally (Nathan 2008: 32). The cultural nationalist position finds expression in its rejection of the governance concept. The representatives of this group often refer to the differences in cultural and political traditions and their resultant structures, and use these to support their argument that the governance concept developed in the West cannot be implemented in China. The emergence of the governance concept – mainly as “good governance” and “global governance” – is perceived as an attempt by the West to sell its own values as universal and to force them on developing countries, including China, without considering the respective national conditions, in order to maintain the hegemony of the West (Tang 2000: 11; Wang/Rosenau 2009: 13, 17, 29). For these reasons, governance is rejected as a possible developmental perspective for China.

The third group, the cultural relativists, position themselves between the other two groups mentioned above. They aim to achieve a specific Chinese method of modernization, while at the same time recognizing the universality of certain foreign concepts (Derichs et al. 2004: 154ff). The cultural relativist strand of the governance discourse is the only one in which an active debate is taking place on the concept and the attempt to indigenize it.

The cultural relativists see governance as a model that could potentially be of use for Chinese development, but they also stress the need for the concept to be adapted to the specific Chinese conditions. They do not consider why or how the adaptation should proceed, nor do they reflect on the problems that could result from the implementation of governance theory (Hang/Pei 2007: 36; Liu 2004; Zou 2005: 88). For many, the basic problem is that governance has emerged in the post-industrial societies of developing countries against a backdrop of particular political, economic, and social conditions that do not correspond with the developments in China (Li Chuncheng 2003; Li Feng 2003; Li Kai 2010: 44f; Liu 2003; Wang 2010: 98; Yang 2002).

Some scholars contend that the problems in adaptation stem from the lack of particular concepts in Chinese traditional culture that are necessary for the implementation of governance. These include contract mentality (*qiyue jingshen* 契约精神), which is believed to be essential for cooperation between the state and society (Li Kai 2010: 45), and the sense of community (*gong-gong jingshen* 公共精神), which allegedly cannot be generated by the traditional Chinese system of governing and can therefore hinder China from developing better governance (Da 2006: passim).

Li Kai, a Master's student at the School of Public Affairs at Xiamen University, is one of the few who believes that the reform of the Chinese system could offer solutions to the implementation problems that arose over the course of the reform process, and could also indicate directions these reforms could take. In his opinion, the difficulties needing to be resolved derive from the fact that, in spite of the reforms already carried out, the Chinese political and economic systems are highly centralized, and the government still dominates the governance process. In addition, the Chinese non-state sector lacks the independence that would allow societal organizations

such as NGOs to take over governance tasks. The government also has little interest in the distribution of power, and the other stakeholders do not perceive themselves as active political subjects. In order to overcome these difficulties and to implement governance, the Chinese government needs to step up reforms, strengthening the independence and effectiveness of the social stakeholders as well as confidence in the cooperation between state and non-state stakeholders (Li Kai 2010: 45ff).

Some researchers have tried to establish the validity of the governance concept in the Chinese context by constructing features common to governance theory and to Marxist-Leninism, particularly in its national form of socialism with Chinese characteristics, as well as to the cultural tradition of Confucianism.<sup>32</sup> Values common to governance theory and Chinese policy are highlighted, and the compatibility of the norms deriving from these values is tested in the Chinese context.<sup>33</sup> The positioning of the stakeholders, i.e. the government, the market, and society, or the government and the people, is considered the most important determinant value in the political (national) arena. Any re-arrangement of this constellation, as these scholars point out, would necessarily entail different options for different courses of action, such as political participation – but not, however, in the shape of an electoral democracy.

Such contributions to the discourse are characterized by two argumentative strategies: the first aims to legitimize the theory with evidence extracted from the Chinese political canon. For this purpose, the words of Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and Hu Jintao are quoted in a context that defines the people and the state as being in a symbiotic relationship, in which the existence of the government depends on the will of the people, whose interests the government serves. The government derives its legitimacy solely from representing the interests of the people and serving their will, as shown in the two following quotations: “Our party’s starting point is to serve the people wholeheartedly” (Mao Zedong); “The governing ability of the party and its political standpoint stem from the people, the support of the people is the most solid foundation and the greatest source of strength” (Hu Jintao, ct. in: Zhang 2010: 118). The value of equality, in contrast to the top-down dichotomy that is seen as outdated and incompatible with the political values of the CCP, can also be found in Confucian cultural traditions, for example in the dictum comparing the ruler and the people to a boat and the sea, as well as in the reference to the rule of the Han Emperors, Wen and Jing, and the Chinese era *zhenghuan* (贞观) of the Tang Emperor Taizong, two periods during which “the greatest possible harmony within society had already

<sup>32</sup> The reference to the cultural tradition of Confucianism should be seen in the context of the cultural nationalist discourse. One extreme position of the cultural nationalists is so-called “political Confucianism,” which starts with the assumption that Western civilization faces a crisis that can only be overcome by traditional Chinese culture. To this effect, the political reality of China is to be changed according to Confucian principles. See Xu (2009: 40f). China’s current problems are not seen as the result of cultural tradition, because the high quality of the imperial officials enabled an efficient form of rule. See Derichs et al. (2004: 154f). However, concepts imported from other countries, such as democracy, are discussed in terms of indigenous, specific Chinese elements. See Derichs et al. (2004: 152). For a detailed examination of so-called modern Confucianism, see, for example, Cha (2003).

<sup>33</sup> This can be seen as an argument for J. W. Meyer’s world society theory, according to which globally valid norms and values are projected onto the individual in the shape of a cultural framework.

been achieved” (Zhang 2010: 108). All these quotations, however, are little more than generalizations; although they retain a decorative function, the relevance of the content to governance theory remains vague.

The second argumentative strategy goes beyond the decorative use of highly generalized individual utterances. The values postulated in governance theory are seen as indigenous and inherent elements of Chinese culture. This perspective has enabled two authors, Gao Zhenyang and Liu Zuyun, to identify ethical and moral components of traditional Chinese rule that form the core of modern political values and norms.<sup>34</sup> In this instance, “political value” refers to the virtuous inner attitude of the ruler or rulers (*renzheng* 任政), and the norms find visible expression in the form of two actions: the action of the ruler (*lizhi* 礼治, rule through rites or rule through respect<sup>35</sup>) and the action of ruling (*dezhi* 德治, moral rule). The authors suggest that although these are organized on a hierarchical basis and are much too concentrated on individuals (rulers or their officials), by including public rights and focusing more on institutions than on individuals, these concepts could be extended to line up with the governance concept. The principle of the moral ruler (*renzheng* 任政) could become good governance (*shanzhi* 善治); his action (*lizhi* 礼治) could become rule of law (*fazhi* 法治); and the ethical-moral attitude of ruling (*dezhi* 德治) as manifested in individual officials could be institutionalized (*dezhi* 德制) (Gao/Liu 2010: 22ff).

In the case mentioned above, these moral, political values rooted in Confucianism are identified as having the potential to be developed into values and norms in line with governance theory, whereas other authors see the development of state/society integration as the goal of Marxism-Leninism. According to some authors of this second group, Engels predicted that a phase of unification between society and the state in the form of total nationalization would give way to the separation of state and society. At the end of this development, however, the state would turn back to society, and unity would be achieved (Zhang/Jing 2009: 11).

From the perspective of Marxism-Leninism, changes in political values, norms, and structures are considered inevitable, because the opening and consequent restructuring of the economy will inevitably lead to fundamental changes in productive forces and relationships (i.e., the basis), and this will necessarily lead to a change in the state superstructure. The inevitable consequence of this theoretical paradigm is the demand for structural changes.

According to some authors, an institutional framework needs to be created that will enable individuals to develop their capacity for freedom – which, according to Marx, is not only the natural right of all human beings but also the ultimate goal. Only if the individual is granted real opportunities to develop his capacity for freedom, will he/she be able to act as a balance for

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<sup>34</sup> At the same time, the authors point out that the traditional form of Chinese rule also reveals a dichotomy between ruler and ruling that is not compatible with governance theory. See Gao/Liu (2010: 22).

<sup>35</sup> The term *lizhi* (礼治) encompasses the idea that each individual should behave according to his/her position in the governing apparatus and the corresponding rules.



institutional weaknesses, “avoid the potential threats of the government’s constructivism, exert a greater influence on politics, and achieve effective socio-economic growth by developing his own goal-oriented values.” (Han/Wang 2006: 23)

These critical contributions to the debate, made by the left-wing camp, are directed against one-sided economic growth (*zengzhang* 增长)<sup>36</sup> that has led to the marginalization of economically and socially weak groups and therefore to conflict. These developments are interpreted as the consequences of the transformation after the state-controlled economic period, during which the state claimed to resolve all problems by operating on the levels of the basis (economy) and the superstructure (politics, regulation) at the same time. After a partial withdrawal, the state has not yet been able to reposition or define a new role for itself, and thus new modes of governance are necessary to resolve the prevailing contradictions. These modes are needed to facilitate the self-regulation of conflicts and contradictions through the participation of the populace by means of bargaining. The present mode of control is not appropriate for this task and even serves to reinforce the contradictions. Minor adjustments alone will not be sufficient to overcome the current problems; the entire economic and administrative organization needs to be reformed, with the participation of a variety of interest groups, the central and local governments, the citizens, and private businesses (Wang 2008: 30f).

Although the references to Marxism-Leninism – as well as the references to liberal theories shaped by Hayek’s legacy – constitute exceptions in the governance discourse, most of the contributions come from the New Left. The liberals view the tasks of establishing a civil society and perfecting the socialist market economy without state intervention as an opportunity to develop “good governance, a democratically just and tolerant harmonious society” (Yang 2009: 82), but the New Left sees the current problems as consequences of precisely these developments. Governance, in their view, will help to restrict the misuse of power by the new economic and political elite that has emerged since the economic reforms (Niu 2010). In this way, each of the two camps represents the political-practical aspect of the governance discourse, but coming from two different perspectives.

#### 4. Governance and Chinese Politics: how much Governance can Harmony tolerate?

The relevance of the Chinese governance discourse for political practice is difficult to prove. We believe, however, that we can provide evidence of this in two ways: first, institutionally, by analyzing the relationship between scholars and the government; second, by employing an approach based on discourse analysis to prove the relevance of the governance discourse for the harmonious society (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会) and the harmonious world (*hexie shijie* 和谐世界). These two models are designed to determine China’s national and international policies in the twenty-first century.

<sup>36</sup> In contrast to socio-economic development (*fazhan* 发展).

The institutional integration of scholars in structures with close links to the government is significant because their participation in internal party discussion processes increases opportunities to exert influence on policy-making. In response to the growing need for scientific expertise that has resulted from economic modernization, the partial withdrawal of the state from many areas, and China's increasing integration into the global economic system, intellectuals now have a working environment in much closer proximity to the government. Currently, 80% of the 2,500 Chinese think tanks and research establishments are financed directly or indirectly by the government (Chen 2011: 78). Not one of these is independent of the government, however, and they cannot be described as "external brains"<sup>37</sup> (Zhu 2009: 337f).

Within this system, a small number of influential scholars have a close working relationship with the political decision-makers. These scholars include Professor Yu Keping, who has played a decisive role in disseminating governance theory in China. Yu Keping is Deputy Director of the Compilation and Translation Bureau of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, one of the most important think tanks in the field of political analysis and theory construction, and he answers directly to the Central Committee of the CCP (Altmeyer et al. 2009: 31).<sup>38</sup> In 2007, he was voted one of the most influential Chinese intellectuals by the Chinese media (Yu 2009b: XIX).

Research institutions and intellectuals outside these circles can also try to exert influence on political decision-making with working papers or by using informal channels and personal connections (Niu 2010; Zhu 2009). A further means of applying political pressure consists in the use of the mass media, such as blogs and publications in the daily newspapers, to impact public opinion. One result of the institutional integration of the scholars is that their discourse has become a component of the political process. On the one hand, the government has a strong influence on the intellectuals, but on the other, the intellectuals are able to exert considerable influence on the political agenda (Chen 2011: passim; Li He 2010: 19; Niu 2010).<sup>39</sup>

On the discursive level, the significance of governance discourse in the debate on the harmonious society and the harmonious world is particularly clear. Since 2004, the model of the

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<sup>37</sup> For this reason, according to the definitions of Western political scientists, these research institutions can hardly be classified as think tanks. See Zhu (2009: 337).

<sup>38</sup> In addition, Yu Keping is Professor and Director of the China Center for Comparative Politics and Economics (CCCPE) and the Center for China Government Innovations (CCGI) at Peking University.

<sup>39</sup> Wang Shaoguang, one of the leading figures in the New Left, finds that the intellectuals have decidedly too much influence on Chinese politics. Nearly all of them have party membership; not only do they constitute a powerful majority in the Consultative Conference and in the People's Congress, but they are also able to influence public opinion and therefore, indirectly, policy, via blogs and the mass media, so that they form a closed circle to serve their own interests. The interests of the wider population are not represented. See Niu (2010). Despite the greater freedom of these intellectuals, the party occasionally intervenes: In December 2010, the Dean of the Guanghua School of Management (Peking University), Zhang Weiying, was relieved of his duties because his stance was considered too radical (too liberal). The left-wing blog "Freezing Point" was shut down in 2006, and the left-leaning publisher of the magazine *Dushu* (读书) was dismissed in 2007. See Bergsten et al. (2008: 40). Apart from this, it can be assumed that the content of articles is checked prior to publication, and that this is carried out ex-ante by the authors themselves or by the publishers. For self-censorship on the internet, see Chung (2008).

harmonious society has served as a political guiding principle. The vision of the harmonious society emerged from the recognition of the pluralization of social interests and the exacerbation of social problems. It comprises “a society that is founded on democracy and the rule of law, justice and equality, trust and truthfulness, friendship and liveliness, order and stability as well as a harmonious relationship to the natural environment” (Holbig 2005: 16f), and stands, above all, for a socially more just society, the improved provision of public goods, and sustainable economic growth (Wacker/Kaiser 2008: 7).

Although the harmonious society is often represented as something authentically Chinese – in the context of Confucian tradition as well as in the context of a long term policy of socialist development founded on Marxism (Taylor/Calvillo 2010: 141f; Wacker/Kaiser 2008: 8) – the reference to governance discourse is a solid component in the debate on the harmonious society. The goals of the harmonious society, for example, are compared with those of governance: the goal of governance is a situation in which all sectors and factors in the social system exist in a state of mutual harmony (Wang 2010: 98). A harmonious society is a society with democracy<sup>40</sup> and good governance (Yu 2009a: 171). In addition, both concepts have the same main content: democracy, the rule of law, and justice (Hang/Pei 2007: 35).

The implementation of governance theory finds its greatest acceptance in the context of the debate on the measures required to realize the official model: being “visionary in character rather than implementation-oriented” (Holbig 2005: 14), the concept of a harmonious society cannot offer any suitable mechanism for the solution of current problems. Intellectuals in different camps can thus employ governance theory to argue support for their interpretation of the way to achieve the harmonious society. While those on the left call for strengthening the rights of the people and eliminating maladministration and contradictions, the liberals demand changes in political structures and more social participation (Zheng/Tok 2007).

Some believe that in the context of a multi-polar governance structure based on horizontal, reciprocal relationships between equal social partners and stakeholders, a structural balance needs to be created in China between the state, the market, and civil society. Only in this way can the actors involved optimize the distribution of resources. Civil society institutions, such as NGOs, can take over the functions of social management and public services as well as additional control functions in order to limit the power of the state and the negative effects on welfare arising from the political influence of individuals (Dong 2005: 3; Fan 2007: 18ff; Guo 2010: 159; Hang/Pei 2007: 35f). One important political task is to create and promote the appropriate framework conditions for these organizations, because the current, non-harmonious situation is the result of insufficient institutionalization and the lack of channels available to the population and social groups to exert their influence (Liu 2010: *passim*).<sup>41</sup>

<sup>40</sup> This is not a reference to democracy in the sense of an electoral democracy. For different meanings of the term “democracy” in the Chinese context, see Nathan (2008: 26f).

<sup>41</sup> Concerning the demand for the growth of the civil society, see also Yu (2011).

On the international level, the harmonious society corresponds to the concept of the harmonious world (Li 2006: 23; Yu 2009a: 169). When Hu Jintao addressed the United Nations in 2005 and presented the concept to the world, he named four points that framed China's positioning in the global state system. First, the demand for multilateralism in order to solve global problems, such as international security and disarmament. Second, a fair non-discriminatory trading system without trade barriers, in order to counter the increasing prosperity gap. Third, the demand for a "spirit of inclusivity" that recognizes different national systems and paths of development over forced uniformity. And fourth, a demand for developing countries to be taken into account in the reform of the United Nations Security Council, to enable them to play a more prominent role in the decision-making processes (Hu 2005).

In the discourse on the harmonious society, the reference to governance theory only follows when certain aspects that the concepts presumably have in common are taken as a starting point. The debate on the harmonious world, however, is for the most part characterized by the deliberate opposition to "global governance," – while at the same time recognizing some points of contact. This can be explained by the fact that the harmonious world was set up as a Chinese alternative to global governance, which serves as a (rhetorical) instrument in international political debates.

The overwhelming majority of Chinese researchers, whose understanding of the concept of global governance has been influenced by an essay titled "Global Governance: An Introduction" (2002) by Yu Keping, declare themselves in full agreement with the content of the theory. It is appropriate for "maintaining global socio-economic order," insofar as the governments of the states, their citizens, and international organizations, by means of "democratic consultations and cooperation [...] promote and maintain global security, peace, development, prosperity, equality and other human rights [...] including the regulation of global economic issues, rules and institutions" (Lan 2008: 70f; Yu 2002a).

The interest of the scholars, however, is focused not so much on the content of the theory as on the international real political constellations and practices, implying that they have serious doubts about the practical use of the theory. Global governance is considered to be a "utopian illusion," tinged with idealism and rejected as not practicable, since the actual role of the state in the international decision-making process is given insufficient attention and the real fact of governing (in the sense of the hierarchical *tongzhi* (统治)) in power politics on an inter-state level is disregarded. The theory is seen as "neo-liberalism hidden under a veneer of idealism [...] a fairy tale of Western centrism and European feelings of superiority that finds expression in this discourse." (Lan 2008: 71) Multinational companies and NGOs are accorded great importance in global governance theory, but many Chinese researchers consider the significance of these international organizations to be over-estimated. To these researchers, the sovereign state remains the most important subject for the international community today, and a state-centered viewpoint prevails (Bräuner et al. 2008: 2f). "NGOs are too divided and diverse to form a united and independent force and [...] may be used by governments and powerful interest groups." (Wang/Rosenau 2009: 17)

The concept of the harmonious world, as the news agency Xinhua announced in 2005, “could be seen as the Chinese version of the global governance theory, as idealistic realism that is of great theoretical and practical significance.”<sup>42</sup> For Chinese scholars, the harmonious world concept precisely addresses the points of criticism by demanding non-hierarchical cooperation and rejecting cultural and political hegemony. In their opinion, although both concepts claim universal validity, the concept of harmony recognizes and tolerates differences, while governance starts with an assumption of common values. “Harmony calls for equal participation by different actors while governance seeks to impose Western rules on the rest of the world” (Wang/Rosenau 2009: 22). This uniformity, however, “if imposed on them [diverse civilizations], can only take away their vitality and cause them to become rigid and decline,” no civilization is better than any other, and therefore “[w]e should respect a country’s right to independently choose its own social system and path of development.” (Hu 2005)

According to proponents of the harmonious world concept, the existing political asymmetries should be balanced by placing an emphasis on multi-lateral cooperation. In addition, the harmonious world supports the strengthening and expansion of the UN Security Council and stresses the importance of cooperation among regional organizations.

The discourses on the harmonious world and the harmonious society highlight the diversity of methods for dealing with the governance concept. These range from accepting certain defined characteristics in indigenous development concepts (harmonious society/good governance) to further marginalizing the governance theory (harmonious world/global governance).

## 5. Conclusion

Governance theory has been widely disseminated and discussed in the People’s Republic of China. Despite individual authors’ frequent failure to precisely define the term, the narrow definition of governance – referring to multi-polarity and non-hierarchical interaction between the state and society – can be seen as prevalent in the Chinese governance discourse. The difference between the governance concept in China and the narrow definition of governance that has emerged in the industrialized nations finds expression in the leading role played by the government in governance processes. This shows clearly that governance discourse has been integrated into a broad range of Chinese discourses through political changes aimed not at changing the system or even at striving for democratization, but at enhancing the effectiveness of the existing system, reducing the contradictions in society, and increasing the participation of different social groups by resolving these contradictions.

Although some scholars do not give credence to the possibility of implementing governance theory in China because of the specific national conditions, others are trying to establish a link to the Chinese – Confucianist and Marxist – traditions of political thought and to indigenize

<sup>42</sup> Xinhuanet 2005: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2005-12/29/content\\_3985331.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2005-12/29/content_3985331.htm); last accessed June 24, 2011.

the governance concept. The ambiguity of the term “governance” has contributed to its success: various political camps can exploit the term to support their own ideas for political development. For the left, it offers opportunities to resolve social problems while strengthening and consolidating the existing system; for the liberals, it serves as the basis of their demands for increased participation.

The interweaving of governance discourse with the discourses on the harmonious society and the harmonious world is a clear indication of the concept’s relevance for political practice in China. Some Chinese scholars have suggested that governance theory could be used to develop the harmonious society, but whether these hopes will be fulfilled remains questionable. After all, governance discourse has been criticized in both the West and in China for its inability to indicate practical courses of action.



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## Research Framework

Governance has become a central theme in social science research. The Collaborative Research Center (SFB) 700 *Governance in Areas of Limited Statehood* investigates governance in areas of limited statehood, i.e. developing countries, failing and failed states, as well as, in historical perspective, different types of colonies. How and under what conditions can governance deliver legitimate authority, security, and welfare, and what problems are likely to emerge? Operating since 2006 and financed by the German Research Foundation (DFG), the Research Center involves the Freie Universität Berlin, the University of Potsdam, the European University Institute, the Hertie School of Governance, the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), and the Social Science Research Center Berlin (WZB).

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