

# Risk Governance and Public Trust

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## *Introduction*

This paper seeks to give an overview of debates about risk governance and consider how they have developed in the very different settings of Western and Chinese society. It argues that:

- Although the risks that most people in Western countries face during the course of their lives have diminished, concerns about risk and uncertainty in the life-course have grown stronger.
- Trust in authorities (both experts and political leaders) in the West has been declining for some time. Such trust is highly relevant to risk governance, which requires confidence in the advice of experts and in policies based upon such advice in order to deal with existing hazards and to develop policies which will meet emerging risks in technical and economic progress and in the environment effectively.
- Commentators argue that risk governance involves practical issues (how to tackle problems successfully or ensure that they do not arise) and legitimacy issues (public acceptance of the proposed policies). Those who locate the basis of trust primarily in the first area tend to stress the role of government in providing effective regulation based on good quality expert advice in building public trust. Those who place more emphasis on the second tend to direct attention to public engagement in risk governance as a foundation for trust. Concerns about legitimacy and about public engagement have become increasingly influential in Western debates about risk governance in recent years.
- China has experience unprecedented economic growth during the last three decades. Some developments (industrialisation, urbanisation, population ageing) resemble those in the West. Social and political traditions differ markedly. Risk governance is mainly pursued through authoritarian approaches within a framework of socialist democracy.
- The pressures of social change and economic progress, intensified in the current world recession, may generate pressures for reforms in risk governance that include more public engagement. However China is likely to pursue its own national trajectory in this field as in others.

## **The Paradox in Western Countries: Greater Security but a Heightened Sense of Risk**

Many commentators have observed that the risks people face in their everyday lives in Western countries appear to be diminishing. Life expectancy increases and living standards rise. However concerns about risk among both government and academics are growing stronger (Mythen, 2006; Taylor-Gooby and Zinn, 2006, ch 1). Explanations of why people should experience their lives as more risky, when from a common-sense perspective this is not the case, fall into six main categories. These explanations are not in conflict and are often linked in various combinations in authoritative commentaries (for example, Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1994; Renn, 2008a; Luhmann, 1991).

*Knowledge-based accounts.* An important stream in Western thinking, which some commentators trace to the Enlightenment, stresses the critique of received ideas. This may lead to a pluralism in accounts of social phenomena. Thinkers as diverse as Lyotard (1984) and Giddens (1990, 1991) argue that the transition from the holistic narratives of modernism to acceptance of the variety of different understandings available in more post-modern societies reinforces uncertainty about social life and how it should be lived, which contributes to a heightened sense of risk. An important aspect of this is a more overt conflict between the approaches of technical experts and those current among the mass public (for example Wynne, 1996).

*Detraditionalisation.* Linked to pluralism at the level of ideas is a decline in the standing of existing normative structures in family, religion and social patterns of authority. Again this promotes uncertainty and individual responsibility in social life. The processes of globalisation and the rapid pace of change in social life, summed up by Giddens as living in a 'Runaway World' (1999), again reinforce this.

*Material interests.* Allied to these issues is the increasing fragmentation of material interests and the structures that both defined and promoted them. The industrial structure of capital and labour with its associated framework of social class politics and related patterns of consumption and family life (Jessop, 2002) generated a particular account of individual interest and of the political economy that would advance it. A greater range of social divisions, by gender, age, ethnicity, religion, region and other factors, are now understood as important. Individuals are less likely to experience divisions of political interests on the lines of traditional social class interest (Boix 2003). New social risks emerge as significant in the social sphere (Taylor-Gooby, 2004), region and national identity in the political sphere (Castles 1998) and all political parties must take account of gender and family interests.

*Risk management.* Growing awareness of risk has led to a prevailing concern with risk management both at the level of government, nationally (see COSU 1998; Eiser, 2005; RRAC, 2008) and internationally (OECD, 2008; IRGC, 2005) and among business and other enterprises (Power, 2004, 2007; Hutter, 2007). Hood points out that different government agencies in the same country often pursue different approaches to managing risk (2001). Harry Rothstein and colleagues show how risk management by an organisation increasingly becomes internalised to become risk management in the interests of the organisation, so that the focus is exclusively on risks to the organisation's interest and reputation, and not the impact on the broader

community (2006). The perception that agencies are managing risks in their own interest rather than that of the public adds an extra layer of mistrust to the reception of statements by public officials and the professionals and experts recruited to support them. In addition those institutions which identify public risks may well have an interest in exaggerating the significance of those risks, because this enlarges their own role (Lofstedt, 2005).

*Risk amplification.* Social psychological and sociological writers have identified processes in individual psychology, in immediate social networks, in the wider institutions of society and in the media that tend to amplify perceptions of risk. The operation of these factors alongside the multiplication of processes of risk management pointed to above promote greater awareness of risk (Pidgeon et al, 2003).

*Practical issues.* Further to these factors, three kinds of practical issue may intensify concerns about uncertainty.

- As Lofstedt and others point out, there has been a large number of scandals in recent years in which authorities have failed to address issues of public concern satisfactorily. For example, the UK government initially claimed that beef consumption involved no health problems (against much scientific opinion) in the 1992-3 BSE crisis (Lofstedt, 2005, 26), the French scandal of contaminated blood in 1991 or the German Ministry of the Interior's inadequate response to Chernobyl in 1986 (2005, 39). These episodes have tended to discredit government, and once trust is lost it is difficult to reconstruct.
- More generally, Beck points out that policy-makers increasingly confront issues where there is little experience, simply because the event has not happened previously and where the potential impact is extremely wide-ranging, although the probability of an occurrence may be low (circumstances in which psychological evidence points to a tendency to exaggerate dread: Slovic, 2001). Under these circumstance, people may well feel a stronger sense of uncertainty.
- The immediate stresses of a severe world recession exacerbate the risks of unemployment, homelessness and poverty and intensify pressures on government to be seen to pursue effective policies.

## **The Role of Public Trust in the Management of Risk**

These factors have been seen by commentators across a range of social science disciplines in the West as promoting a heightened awareness of risk and uncertainty among the general population. Trust is an important factor in managing risk (Luhmann, 2005; Moellering 2006; Seligman, 1997; Siegrist et al 2007). However there is also an increasing mistrust of governmental and scientific experts, and trust is much easier to damage than to rebuild. This leads to strong interest in Western countries in factors that may support or damage trust.

A large literature identifies a wide range of definitions of trust (see for example Crasswell, 1993). These bring together three factors. Trust is forward-looking, concerns the relationship between the interests of different parties and involves issues that matter to someone. A social actor trusts an expert or agency when they believe that they will act (develop policy, give advice) in a way that will serve the interests of the first party, and they are prepared to make themselves vulnerable on the basis of that belief. Future orientation and vulnerability are significant, because there is little point to trust unless the trustor takes a risk in relation to issues that are currently uncertain.

Two main components in theories of trust have emerged: these concern the grounds on which the behaviour in question of the other party might be predicted and the relative status of normative issues as opposed to rational deliberation in the process. Trust is relevant to relationships at many levels, from the intimate to more impersonal orientations to official agencies and bodies. These points apply generally.

- The first component is to do with the belief that someone will act in a way that merits trust. Relevant factors might be track-record, the capacity in terms of access to resources, skill and knowledge to act in such a way and the existence of incentives that might lead them to do so. Such factors are prominent in rational actor theories of trust (Das Gupta, 2002; Gambetta, 2000).
- Other commentators emphasize the point that trust is forward-looking. Problems arise in anticipating another party's behaviour under altered circumstances, or in predicting how incentives might operate, particularly in an uncertain future (Hardin, 2002; Taylor-Gooby, 2008, ch 9). From this perspective something that will reinforce the commitment of the trusted party to pursue the trustor's best interests is needed. Trust theories typically supply this by postulating an additional normative aspect of trust. Hardin, for example, in influential work, argues that trust implies a normative commitment on the part of the trusted person or agency to the trustor's interests. Other theories supply a similar cohesive interest through the perception of shared values between trustor and trustee (for example Seligman, 1997; Siegrist et al, 2007).

A substantial tradition of political science, sociological, social psychology and psychological work identifies both aspects practical and normative aspects in trust (Moellering, 2006; Rothstein, 2005; Hovland, 1953; Metlay, 1999; Frewer et al 2002) and this approach is supported by empirical analysis (Poortinga and Pidgeon, 2003; Eiser et al, 2002; Taylor-Gooby, 2006a).

Trust walks on two legs: rational and value-based. Both aspects need to be taken into account in the governance of risk. We move on to review developments in national and international risk governance, which seek to promote public trust in policies designed to mitigate risk. A major division lies between those who are concerned to secure public trust through public engagement in addition to regulation, and those who place most emphasis on ensuring that regulation is well-founded, consistent and effective. These approaches correspond loosely to the two approaches to trust resting

on the normative considerations relevant to the inclusion of value-considerations and the evidence of track-record and so on that bears on rational deliberation. They place different emphases on top-down and bottom-up processes.

## **Cross-National Approaches to Risk Governance: the IRGC and Public Engagement**

The International Risk Governance Council is an NGO founded in 2003 to fill a gap in risk management and governance as a response to the growth of public and policy-makers' anxiety and uncertainty about risk during the 1990s and the plethora of information and viewpoints. It is intended as 'an international, independent body to bridge the increasing gaps between science, technical development, decision-makers and the public and, in doing so, act as the catalyst for improvements in the design and implementation of effective risk governance strategies'. Its focus is on emerging systemic risks where governance currently appears to be in deficit. It aims to provide recommendations to policy-makers on how to correct them (IRGC 2008, p1.). The IRGC is particularly concerned with risks that are international and for which it believes there is currently a deficit in governance, because appropriate agencies do not exist, appropriate policies are not pursued or the risk is not properly understood at the appropriate level. It examines such issues as nano-technology, the SARs outbreak, biomass energy, pandemic influenza, energy security, and the loss of pollination services due to changes in insect populations.

In its White Paper, the IRGC sets out a four-stage cycle of risk governance, comprising pre-assessment, appraisal, judgement of tolerance and acceptability and management, all stages involving issues of communication (IRGC, 2005, 13). This model is formalised so that it provides clear choices for policy-makers. The range of choices and the relevant considerations for each stage of the process are spelt out in detail in the remainder of the document and are further discussed in publications by the principal author, Ortwin Renn (Renn 2008a, b, c). Major themes are the categorisation of risks as simple or as complex and as involving uncertainty or ambiguity, the analysis of appropriate strategies to address different kinds of risk, the appraisal of alternative strategies and the public acceptability of various solutions. Important questions in relation to appraisal and acceptability are the appropriate roles for different stake-holders and the part to be played by public engagement and consultation.

The distinction between simple and complex risks depends on the 'degree of difficulty in establishing the cause-effect relationship between a risk agent and its potential consequences'. Uncertainty is to do with the 'reliability of this relationship' and ambiguity with 'the degree of controversy with regard to both what a risk actually means for those affected and the values to be applied when judging whether something needs to be done about it' (2005, 12). In general simple risks, when the basis of the problem is well understood, can often be dealt with through a routinised decision-making system. Complex risk problems are likely to involve much greater effort in analysing the issues and reconciling differences among experts. When problems of uncertainty and ambiguity are involved, the range of stake-holders expands and the questions of consultation and engagement are particularly pressing.

When there is uncertainty about the nature, incidence or scope of the risk, it becomes important to involve a broad range of stake-holders, to clarify the scale of concern about the issue and to enlist support for strategies to address it. When ambiguity arises due to differences in the extent to which different outcomes are valued by the various groups affected, it becomes necessary to pursue a more participative discourse so that the differing values can be communicated and reviewed and the policy-making process can be seen to be fair.

Uncertainty and ambiguity problems raise issues in relation to risk assessment, since the scale and incidence of the risk may be controversial and the various stake-holders may differ on the significance of the issue. In these cases it is desirable to engage as many stake-holders as possible. Renn's book and associated papers review methods of stake-holder engagement in detail. They point out that different theoretical positions in social science theorise engagement in different ways (2008b) and that the level of engagement may vary from consultation of representatives through to substantial (and expensive) exercises which seek to engage the mass public at a range of levels to ensure that different views on the nature and resolution of the issues are included (2008c).

Many of the risk issues that have attracted attention in the modern world fall into the IRGC categories of 'uncertain' or 'ambiguous'. The earlier discussion showed how the social changes associated with the evolution of modernity has expanded the consciousness of uncertainty in many people's lives. As Giddens puts it, our experience is often of trying to sustain stability in a 'runaway world'. Social change has also broadened the plurality of expertise which is understood to be relevant, so that conflicts of technical knowledge as well as at the level of values are more frequent. At the same time the fragmentation of some of the normative and traditional frameworks that previously played a major role in directing the life-course focuses attention on the possibility of ambiguity in values. Different groups understand their interests and the factors that bear on them in different ways, and all those involved become increasingly aware of the range of interests in play. All these changes place greater pressure on social trust. The Chinese context as we shall argue is rather different. The resources of public trust both from the social traditions often summed up as 'Confucian' and the political traditions of an authoritarian state suggest a weaker demand for public engagement. However the stresses of very rapid change and the current severe economic pressures may increase it.

### **An Alternative Viewpoint: Trust and Regulation**

Other commentators argue that public engagement approaches to securing trust may generate more problems than they resolve. These perspectives stress the role of effective regulation, and imply that engagement should receive less attention. Lofstedt (2005) uses attitude survey and other data to chart the rapid decline in trust in public institutions in a range of western societies (2005, xv). While the general social changes outlined earlier play an important role in this process, he argues that the scandals of governance failure in recent years are the precipitating factor. People tend not to trust government because it has shown itself inadequate. However, he minimises the role of public deliberation, arguing that its value is exaggerated in many accounts of risk governance (2005, 125).

He identifies four ideal typical approaches to risk governance, analysing the process from a Weberian perspective: political regulation (including litigation), public deliberation, technocratic/scientific approaches and economic rationality (2005, 15-16). All require political legitimacy to be effective and all (including deliberation) can have the effect of reinforcing or undermining public trust. The problems with public deliberation are that it may make the public more aware of any limitations in the capacity and knowledge of policy-makers and the experts on whom they rely, may provide opportunities for interest groups to construct constituencies of opinion and mobilise them and may highlight differences of values and interests (21; Rossi, 1997).

The argument rests on a notion of trust that distinguishes the normative aspects (fairness on the part of policy-makers) from the more practical issues of their competence in managing policy-making process and their efficiency (2005, 6). This corresponds to the distinction between normative and evidential bases for trust identified earlier. Failures in any of these areas may lead to mistrust but, Lofstedt argues, deliberation is only relevant to the fairness issue. Incompetence and inefficiency are better managed through regulation. In fact, public engagement may be counter-productive because it provides opportunities for dissatisfied groups to organise and to amplify their grievances.

Examples from the rather different governance contexts of the US, UK, Germany and Sweden are used to reinforce the point. In Germany, for example, in the context of a relatively high level of trust and a strict regulation regime with a strong measure of consensus (Lijphart, 1998) the siting of a controversial waste incinerator was agreed through a deliberation process aimed at achieving consensus. The outcome was to build trust and reconcile differences. However, a US example, where trust is lower and where the use of adversarial litigious approaches as well as cost-benefit analysis is more common, negotiations between key stake-holders generated a satisfactory solution without the need for wider deliberation and the accompanying risk of generating public opposition.

The Swedish example, set in a relatively high trust context with a tradition of technocratic and stake-holder based consensus-building, indicates the possible problems of deliberation. In the case of the enforcement of a decision to shut down a nuclear plant after a relatively minor accident, the established relationship between the regulator and the industry led to a smooth execution of the instruction without conflict, while a more deliberative approach might have simply exaggerated mistrust and concern.

The UK gives a more forceful example. Risk regulation in this country has a tradition of consensual links between industry and regulator. This is currently under attack, as confidence in experts and officials and concerns about the risk of the 'capture' of regulators by the bodies whom they are supposed to monitor grows (see for example Laffont and Tirole, 1991). The mobilisation of public opinion by environmental interest groups in the prominent example of the disposal of the Brent Spa oil storage vessel led to a revision of the initial decision, despite the fact that the claims made by the interest groups about the extent of pollution maximally at risk were shown to be misleading. Once the interest group had entered the debate, public opinion was more inclined to believe its statements than those of company and government experts. The

government was forced to retreat. A similar point might be made about the GM ‘Great Debate’ in the UK, as a participation exercise intended to help build a consensus approach to the introduction of GM crops that in fact damaged public confidence in policy-makers (AEBC, 2001; Taylor-Gooby, 2006b). In general, Lofstedt suggests, current debates tend to exaggerate the importance of deliberation exercises and downplay that of regulation, sometimes with unhelpful consequences.

These arguments are well-made. Controlled public deliberation in higher-trust Germany was more successful than forced deliberation in lower-trust UK. In other contexts, policy-makers succeeded in achieving a solution without involving the uncertainty, expense and investment of time in undertaking public engagement. However they do not address the point that context is of considerable importance. If the public already regards regulators and the experts who advise them as highly competent, reliable and responsive to what people want, the demand for immediate engagement is reduced.

In made cases, public confidence is already low, and the pressures which undermine trust outlined in the opening section continue to operate whatever strategy is pursued. This creates difficulties for policy-makers in making progress on the basis of consensus or stake-holder negotiations. Trust in experts and policy-makers is declining. The public expect a level of engagement and are aware of conflicts of values and interests which make involvement appropriate. In such a context, Western governments found it difficult to avoid public engagement exercises, despite the fact that these may lead to greater controversy and to delays in arriving at an acceptable decision.

### **The OECD: Focusing on Risk Regulation**

The IRGC seeks to advance an international convergence in approaches to risk governance, with a growing role for public engagement. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) is currently in process of developing an overview of national and international approaches to risk regulation which echoes some of Lofstedt’s concerns and tends towards a managerial regulatory approach. Their framework of assessment, management, review and communication is similar to that of Renn and the IRGC. Not surprisingly, given their intergovernmental role, they emphasize issues of communication. This requires close attention to developing a common framing of the risk issue between all stake-holders.

The OECD go on to argue that risk assessment is complicated by the problems of determining the impact of particular developments, assessing public concern, and, most difficult in their view, judging public tolerance for particular policies. There is also an emphasis on technically rational risk strategies, using the criteria of effectiveness, cost efficiency, the limitation of side-effects, and the availability of counter-balancing opportunities to assess options. The role of communication is primarily to allow the public to understand the rationale of policy-making and to make informed choices. They point to the risk of relying on ‘well-organised private interests to the detriment of the general public’ and to allowing citizen access to play an extensive part in the process as a ‘short-term solution to the problem of risk management’ (OECD, 2008).



The report identifies a number of key issues (OECD, 2008, 8). Interestingly those relevant to public deliberation focus on the instruments available to the policy-makers to assess public views, the capacity to resist pressures on government (including those from the public) and the problems in developing a more integrated and holistic approach in terms of better common framing and linking between governments, rather than between policy-makers, stake-holders and the public (see Burgess, 2008, 30). The issues are treated primarily from a top-down perspective, from the view-point of policy-makers and government.

The OECD arguments are reinforced by commissioned essays from major commentators. Majone starts out from the psychological evidence, emphasized by Slovic and others, that the public often exaggerates particular low probability ‘dread’ risks but pays insufficient attention to more mundane but higher probability hazards. Secondly he argues that risk regulation is increasingly fragmented as agencies focus on the immediate problems that face their own operation (2006). The outcome is to emphasize co-ordination and effective regulation, with a joined-up approach between assessment and management. De-politicisation of risk management, however, is a limited strategy and any independent agency must ultimately be under the authority of, but at arms length from, the elected political system (Majone, 2006, 32). A further paper by Weiner similarly stresses the problem of interconnectedness between regulatory agencies in order to address global risks (2006).

## **National and Cross-national Trends**

Three trends in Western approaches to risk governance may be identified. First, at the national level, a range of social and political pressures have tended to shift policy-makers away from technical and expert approaches to risk and risk governance to give the wider public a greater role, to a large extent in response to the decline in trust. Secondly and allied to this there has been a tendency for convergence between different national approaches, summed up in the evidence that official risk management agencies in the US and in most European countries are concerned to pursue a blend of regulation and public engagement, and in the work of bodies like the IRGC. Thirdly, the outcome is at present a division between those approaches which emphasize the role of public deliberation and those which pay more attention to the claim that such involvement may generate serious problems in risk governance, and that the role of experts and official regulators should be strengthened.

A number of commentators identify a convergence between risk regulatory approaches in the US and in European countries (see Burgess, 2008, for a valuable review). Essentially, growing concerns about risk in the relatively open US system, where there are multiple avenues to address the relevant agencies through public debate, litigation and access to government committees, have led to continued pressures in areas such as public health, food safety, law and order and the environment during the 1960s and 1970s. The response was to establish state regulatory agencies (for example, the Environment Protection Agency, the food safety arm of the Food and Drug Administration, the Occupational Health and Safety Administration) in the early 1970s with responsibility for enforcing regulations and pushing for further legislation. Regulation at the European level started from a very

different standpoint, but has tended to move towards a similar combination of state agency and public engagement. Initially, the systems in Europe involved close collaboration between officials, business and other stake-holders with a strong role of scientific advice and technical expertise. More recently they have shifted away from regulation and an ascendancy of technical expertise towards greater acceptance of public involvement and of the existence of conflicting viewpoints (Vogel, 2003; Burgess, 2008).

Vogel suggests that regulatory styles are currently 'often politicised, highly contentious and characterised by a suspicion of science and mistrust of both government and industry' (Vogel, 2003, 557). This may be understood as a response to the regulatory failures stressed by Lofstedt in the context of growing influence of interest groups and an expansion of the regulatory role of the EU, especially in the context of competence in health and safety at work, environmental protection and food standards. EU approaches emphasize the construction of a consensus between stakeholders and this leads to 'public participation, self-regulation and voluntary action by economic actors' (Lofstedt, 2005, 40, see Andersen, 1997). More recently this has led to an emphasis on precaution in Europe. One recent empirical study of random samples of 100 cases of regulation in both contexts indicates that the degree of stringency is now similar between Europe and the US and if anything tighter in Europe (Hammit et al, 2005).

In the UK the established system of consensus building between regulator and regulated has been supplanted by agencies (the Food Safety Agency, Financial Services Agency, Health and Safety Executive) whose remit gives a strong role to the education of consumers and pressures from the well-informed individual end-user of services (supported by interest groups) within the market to enforce high standards (for example, Lunt, 2005). Burgess (2008, 5-7) points out that the UK has perhaps moved furthest in terms of consumer involvement due to its underlying liberal commitment to the use of market forces as a system for advancing the common good, its particular scandal-hungry media, the modernising commitments of its government and the damaging experience of the handling of the BSE outbreak.

These considerations have led to attempts to involve the public in risk policy-making through set piece consultations of which the most developed is the GM Food 'Great Debate'. At the level of expert debate consideration has moved from a recognition of the importance of involving the public (Royal Society 1997) to debate about exactly what form involvement should take. There is a commitment to include public consultation as early as possible in the process of policy development, and the current discussion emphasizes so-called 'upstream' engagement (Willis, 2004).

Risk regulation in Western countries is typically discussed from two standpoints. One stresses public engagement and the other the value of regulation that is primarily informed by expert viewpoints and effective authority. The pressures that have been experienced as a result of the social and political changes outlined at the beginning of the paper have led to a convergence in risk governance processes between the US and Europe. Risk governance now includes both aspects, with the outcome that public deliberation has a higher profile in Europe than at any time previously, while regulatory agencies have grown in significance in the US. An important reason for this is the growth of public concern about risk and the accompanying weakening of

public trust in experts and authorities. Public deliberation is developed in order to build trust, but may also weaken it when the existing system of risk governance is controversial and when deliberation allows conflicts of value and interest to enter and to become intensified through the activities of interest groups.

Under these circumstances, it is difficult to see how pressures for public engagement can be resisted. Current approaches seek to include public engagement at an early stage and to incorporate as wide a range of views as possible. They also involve establishing formally independent agencies which seek to build continuing relationships with all the parties involved. This limits the possibility of the escalation of conflicts of interests and values through the suggestion that one viewpoint is being downplayed. It also enables different stake-holders to understand the diversity of response and to shape their strategies appropriately.

We now move on to consider risk governance in China, in a context which in some ways resembles and in some ways differs markedly from that in the West.

## **Risk Governance in China**

China has experienced rapid and far-reaching changes, which have accelerated since the introduction of the policy of ‘reform and opening’ from 1978. These include, at the economic level, accelerated industrialisation, participation in the world market and the development of market-centred enterprises and of entrepreneurialism leading to sustained and mainly export-led growth; at the social level, large-scale urbanisation, the development of a middle class in cities and large inequalities between regions, between city and countryside and within cities; and at the political level privatisation and the introduction of more market-centred systems in services such as health care, decentralisation across a number of institutions and moves towards greater democratisation at the local level. The pressures bearing on China in some ways parallel the developments that led to modernisation in the West (industrialisation, privatisation and the market, fragmentation of traditional structures). In other ways they differ, particularly in the socialist approach to democracy, which favours a one-party system (Li, 2008, 1), in the different traditions of state-citizen relations and of social relationships, and in the lower level of economic development in much of the country.

A schematic comparison of China and the West in relation to the six explanations of concern about risk and uncertainty discussed at the beginning of this paper might identify similarities and differences. The established scepticism of expert opinion based on an awareness of the possibility of *plural approaches to knowledge* appears to be nourished by Western traditions and may be less evident in China. While such independence of thought may not be such a strong factor in *eroding traditional structures* of authority, social and geographic mobility and the opening of market opportunities may have an effect. However the resources of traditional authority both in entrenched Confucian values and in an authoritarian system of government are likely to be considerable. Social institutions such as the *guan-xi* system of mutual confidence (Luo, 2005) and the solidary values of rural communities (Tsai, L. 2009) provide reinforcement to the stability of existing institutions in a way that is not similarly available in the West.

In relation to *material interests*, the new social risks of post-industrial society, concerned with population ageing, changes in gender roles and shifts in the structure of jobs may be emerging only very recently. However, divisions of interest between workers and employers, between rural areas and cities and between the masses and the new peaks of entrepreneurial wealth are clearly significant.

In a one-party democracy government bears an added burden of responsibility for the *management of social risks*, which is hard to escape. Processes of *risk amplification* through the media and other social processes are not as developed as in the West but are becoming more significant. At the *practical level*, scandals in relation to food contamination or the lack of resilience of buildings in natural disasters may lead to rapid responses by government that restore confidence, but may in the longer term erode public confidence. The environmental and global issues where government experience is limited are unlikely to make so much impact in China as in the West, because the success of government in meeting more immediate basic needs of security of food, housing and income is a more pressing concern for most people.

The final and immediate issue of recession imposes further stresses precisely because of the importance of basic security. The main success of the Chinese government during the past three decades has been to lift unprecedented numbers of people out of poverty. If the world recession leads to a collapse of export-led growth that damages the living standards of many members of the population, this could have very serious repercussions for social solidarity and for public trust.

The issue of public trust in risk management by government in China has been shaped by factors that in some ways parallel those in the West and in some ways depart from them. The main differences are the greater strength of the factors reinforcing traditional authority and tending to sustain an entrenched public trust and the vulnerability of the system to the pressures of prolonged economic difficulties. The tradition in China is for a system of risk governance that leads from the top down and relies on effective regulation, so that problems are resolved speedily in the interests of citizens. Current stresses on the system may now be leading to stronger support for public engagement.

## **Public Engagement and Social and Economic Change in China**

There is substantial controversy about the implications for participation and public involvement in decision-making. On the one hand, many commentators have argued that greater market liberalism in the economic sphere is typically linked to pressure for political changes. Leading intellectuals and the political elite have argued for a continuing programme of reforms, for example in statements and interviews at home and abroad by the President, Hu Jintao, and the Premier, Wen Jiabao, endorsing ‘the idea of accelerating political reforms’ (Li, 2008, 3), and in the influential essay *Democracy is a good thing*, reproduced in many major newspapers (Yu, 2008). All villages are required to hold elections every three years to select local leadership and have voted corrupt or unpopular leaders out of office. Direct elections are being extended to townships. Further experiments with democracy such as the 2005 Zeguo Deliberative Poll allowing representative citizens in Wenling City to discuss and form

opinions on 30 major projects are being pursued (Fishbein et al, 2006) . Some writers argue that ‘measurement of public opinion and popular support for local projects is now routinely achieved through consultative meetings and public hearings’(Leib and He, 2006, 8).

A series of reforms have somewhat increased the independence of the judiciary. Despite controls, the media and the internet are becoming more open. There has been a sharp expansion in non-governmental organisations, with some 280 thousand registered by 2005 according to the Ministry of Civil Affairs, with unofficial estimates as high as three million (Howell, 2003). These developments take place in the context of the shift away from an emphasis on growth at all costs towards the pursuit of the social goals implied in the goal of a ‘harmonious society’. These include ‘democracy and the rule of law’ (understood in the context of a socialist tradition of democracy), ‘fairness and justice’ and ‘stability and orderliness’ (Hu, 2005, quoted in Wong 2008, 6).

On the other hand, it is unclear how far political or economic power-holders wish to pursue reforms that will result in a substantial transfer of power. Li points out that ‘despite the recent wave of Chinese intellectual discourse on democracy and the top leaders’ promises, the general public and political elites seem unable to reach a consensus on which direction politics in China should take’ (2008, 4). The cadre of officials and administrators who provide current office-holders are unenthusiastic, and the tradition of government by meritocracy inimical to the idea of an elected leadership, as recent responses to the Charter 08 initiative indicate (BBC 2008). The experience of the use of the democracy as a slogan in the past promotes cynicism about current moves. The authority of the CCP remains pre-eminent and organisations like Falun Gong are not permitted. Very different traditions to those of Western countries shape the context in which these issues emerge (Heberer and Schubert, 2009, 2-3).

Some commentators argue that the recent changes are window-dressing to ‘make the authoritarian system more fair, more effective and more – not less – sustainable’ – resilient authoritarianism’ (Nathan, 2008). An important strand in the argument points to the opportunities for corruption and inefficiency in an administrative framework which is still largely authoritarian. The only one out of six indicators of good governance used by the World Bank on which China scores above 50 per cent is government effectiveness, while the main EU countries score above 75% on all (with rather lower scores for political stability, but still much higher than in China, in Spain and France – Kaufmann et al, 2008, quoted in Wong 2008, 11). In control of corruption, rule of law, regulatory quality and accountability and voice China scores much lower. Pei argues that corruption ensures ‘the CCP’s political monopoly through policies of rent protection’ (Pei, 2006).

Nonetheless, growth has been enormously impressive, reaching 11.4 per cent by 2007 and falling to 9.8 per cent by 2009 (Asia Development Bank, 2008). However, the economy has been hard hit by the world recession. Exports fell by some 40 per cent in the last quarter of 2008 and unemployment has tripled. Growth forecasts for 2009 were revised down to 7.5 per cent in November 2008 by the World Bank and may now even lower (Financial Times, 2008), although premier Wen Jinbao restated the objective of maintaining growth at 8 per cent at the Eleventh National People’s

Congress in March 2009. The decline in growth will increase unemployment, imposing pressures on the capacity of rural areas to absorb those returning jobless from special economic zones and raising serious problems of social harmony.

It is unclear whether the move to a more liberal market system is generating demands for the far-reaching political restructuring sometimes suggested by liberal political economists. The individuals that make up the new middle class may not be strongly interested in such reforms: 'today most entrepreneurs are...working 18 hour days and struggling to stay in business....most entrepreneurs think the system works for them' Tsai, 2008, 3). Tsai's work, based on over 200 interviews, argues that the entrepreneurs value stability, are not a cohesive class and are willing to pay bribes because it gives them a better outcome. 'While the upper echelon of the business class possesses the economic clout, they are not active in forming autonomous organizations and are in fact incorporated by the party-state. Finally, even without the joined political pressure from the business elites, the operating environment for private businesses has significantly improved' (Yang 2008). Correspondingly there are some indications that those least advantaged are more enthusiastic for stronger government interventions and for more secure public services (Whyte 2002, Wang Feng, 2007)).

None the less, the shift towards market institutions leads to a tendency for the interests of groups such as the national oil companies and other major state-owned enterprises to diverge from those of the state (Downs, 2008). While this does not imply shifts to greater engagement of the public it implies that real pressures for a greater involvement of more groups in political power will continue and grow stronger. Migration, urbanisation, de-centralisation and the privatisation of a number of state responsibilities have all increased the uncertainties that many members of lower income groups face (Chan et al, 2008, ch 10). These problems will grow worse in the current recession. It is uncertain whether the current land reforms from which some will gain much more than others will create a rural middle class with a stabilising influence or will exacerbate problems of inequality in the countryside (Ho, 2005).

The experiences of elections at the village and neighbourhood level appear likely to generate continuing pressures for political participation (Heberer, 2008; Schubert, 2008). Commentators point to the need for more public participation to enhance China's capacity to manage the environmental risks from continued economic growth (see the overview by Zhang et al, 2008). In an insightful analysis of the various processes whereby state support for those affected by the Three Gorges project has been managed, Gransow distinguishes both participatory process (involving the active engagement of recipients of new housing in the design and location of the units) and neo-liberalism (involving the allocation of cash sums which enabled the recipients to purchase alternative housing that they could afford) from the traditional paternalism, which simply allocated the housing the authorities deemed appropriate (Gransow, 2008). It is unclear at present how far the new engagement processes will develop and whether they will spread from the management of support to those affected by risks to involvement in risk governance at an earlier stage in the process. It is also unclear how the balance between participatory collective engagement and an individualist neo-liberal strategy which permits substantial inequalities to emerge will be struck.

Yeh concludes a review of recent legislation: 'if China could implement all the policies recently promulgated by the State Council, China could well progress in a better sustainable manner. However ... the success of implementation requires a consistent commitment from all level of cadres in the Chinese bureaucracy. In the absence of a democratic government and a lack of statutory environmental rights vested with its citizens, success in attaining further sustainable development rests with the Chinese bureaucracy and what more, is at the mercy of the authoritative few at the top of the hierarchy' (2007, 399). This puts the emphasis on effective implementation as well as popular engagement, in a way that is similar to the interest in both areas in the Western discussions reviewed earlier.

## **Risk Governance in China and the West: Engagement and Regulation**

Western debates have increasingly emphasized the way in which issues of risk and uncertainty become increasingly important in people's understanding of their social lives in a more globalised and detraditionalised world. There is a particular concern about a decline in public trust. Approaches to risk governance in a number of countries indicate a greater role for participation and public involvement in achieving acceptable solutions. Some commentators suggest that these developments may damage trust if applied in inappropriate circumstances and instead argue for stronger regulation and for cross-national collaboration in developing this.

Public trust in central government in China appears to be rather higher than in the West, but this coexists with concern about corruption at lower levels. There is a large number of risk issues in China in such areas as the environment, food safety and health and safety at work. In general, these issues are often understood as involving the pursuit of profit by business or corruption among officials who fail to enforce regulations. In cases such as the melamine contamination of milk products that came to light in September 2008, the Sichuan earthquake in May 2008, or the industrial water pollution in Harbin in November 2005, central government has responded rapidly and forcefully. However, there are continuing concerns about meso-level corruption and inefficiency in the failure to enforce safety standards. There are also cases, such as the SARS epidemic in early 2003, where the government response was initially slow and concerned primarily to placate public concerns, in some ways comparable to the UK government's approach to BSE. The management of risk and the maintenance of official legitimacy appears to be located within a regulatory rather than a participative logic.

China faces many pressures on the development of its political system, exacerbated at present by sharply declining growth rates and by rapidly rising unemployment. The response to these pressures is at present unclear. There is an expansion of electoral engagement at the local level. Parallel to this, the logic of market relationships continues to grow more pervasive and to provide opportunities for conflicts of interest. China is increasingly open to the pressures of globalisation and of the destabilisation of the life-course that have influenced understanding of risk and uncertainty in the West. The international credit crisis and the repercussions for employment in export industries, for foreign investment, for unemployment and for a

return to villages by urban migrants will generate further risks and uncertainties in people's lives. These will in turn produce additional pressures on government for the development of effective risk policies that are effective and are seen to be so, and at the same time promote social harmony.

Issues of uncertainty and of conflicts of interests in a particular setting have led to shifts towards greater public engagement in risk governance in Western countries. Whether they will lead in a similar direction in the Chinese context, where the pressures of industrialisation, urbanisation and rapid development are in some ways parallel but the social and political traditions are very different, is undecided.

Four points emerge from the discussion:

- There is widespread interest in China, among the country's leadership, in the media, among intellectuals and more widely among lower levels of officialdom and in village communities, in the question of how to balance economic progress with social harmony.
- The shift towards greater public involvement in decision-making will be difficult to reverse, although it is not obvious that this implies a demand for a Western-style political system.
- Many commentators in the West have argued that greater public engagement is central to sustaining public trust in the governance of risks in a context where daily life is becoming more uncertain for many people.
- The Chinese setting is shaped by different social and political traditions. The development of risk governance is likely to pursue its own distinctive trajectory.



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