

Administrative Reforms in China: An Analysis of the Government Affairs Service Center of Pu'er City

Yu Yan¹, Prosper Bernard², Michel Plaisent³ & James Ming-Hsun Chiang⁴

Abstract

Public administration in China has seen significant changes since the early 2000s. This study analyzes the changes recently undertaken in the Government Affairs Service Center of Pu'er City, a formal agency designed to connect the public with bureaucratic departments via a one-stop service facility. The article contrasts the performance of GSAC before and after the reforms implemented in 2012-13. The adoption of modern public administrative methods, guidelines, and practices have significantly improved the functionality and efficiency of GASC, making it much more of a consumer-oriented and performance-driven public agency.

Keywords: China, Government Affairs Service Center, one-stop public service, public administrative reform

1. Introduction

Since the early 2000s Chinese authorities have sought to improve the quality and efficiency of public services by reforming the structure of public administration. One of the reforms to be implemented by governments at the provincial, city, county, and township levels early in this endeavor was the establishment of one-stop service administrative facilities, designed to ease the process of accessing government (Zhang 2006, 35). One-stop government services have been implemented in numerous countries worldwide, a sign of its utility and functionality as a modern form of rendering public services (Kubicek 2006).

¹PhD, School of Marxism, Tsinghua University

²PhD, UQAM

³PhD, Department of Management and Technology, University of Québec à Montréal

⁴DBA, James Ming-Hsun Chiang, Research Center of Government Administration, Peking University

As a central gateway through which individuals could communicate and interact with government, it was hoped that one-stop services would improve the responsiveness, efficiency, and effectiveness of Chinese public administration.

The catalyst for setting up one-stop service facilities—referred to as Government Affairs Service Centers (GASCs)—came from the Administrative Permission Law of the People's Republic of China (APL), approved during the fourth meeting of the Standing Committee of the Tenth National People's Congress in August 2003. Article 10 of the APL stated that, "people's governments at or above the county level shall establish a sound system to supervise the granting of administrative permission by administrative departments and exercise strict supervision over and inspection of the granting of such permission by the said departments. These rules provide a legal basis for all levels of Chinese government affairs service centers." Article 25 of the APL added that, "The people's government of a province, autonomous region or municipality directly under the central Government may ... decide to let one administrative department exercise the power of administrative permission which is exercised by relevant administrative department."

However, one-stop service facilities faced a number of problems once established. GASCs did little more than 'receive and send' requests from users. This was symptomatic of the fact they had limited powers of coordination, supervision, decision-making, and guidance. As a result, GASCs failed to engender administrative efficiency, effectiveness, and innovation, as Aiming Wu and Chuijiang Sun (2004, 62) note. Often, they faced competition from the very departments with whom they sought to foster coordination and supervision. As Weixia Lu and Hua Chen (2008, 120-1) and Zhang Wuxing (2006) observe, the departments within the GASC jockeyed for bureaucratic authority, hoarded rather than shared information with one another, and operated under vague standards of supervision. Further, these departments sought to protect their bureaucratic autonomy and consequently showed little willingness to pool their resources within GASCs (Chen 2006, 39, Guo 2007). This undermined the GASCs' ability to communicate clearly with citizens, who frequently received conflicting guidance from different bureau-based service windows (Schellong and Mans 2007). Lastly, because leadership attention toward matters of administrative reforms varied across governmental levels, the development and performance of government affairs service centers differed greatly.

This article explores how one-stop administrative facilities have been reformed since their introduction in the early 2000s. The analysis will focus on the experience of Pu'er City, which established its municipal GASC and county GASC in 2002. The analysis gauges the effects of the public administration reforms on the performance of the Pu'er's GASC.

2. Reforming GASCs

Concerns about the suboptimal results of this public administrative reform as well as the desire of Chinese authorities to push for broader and deeper public service improvements figured largely in the report of The 18th National Congress of Communist Party of China in 2012:

To reach the goal of establishing a socialist administrative system with Chinese characteristics, we should separate government administration from the management of enterprises, state assets, public institutions, and social organizations, and build a well-structured, clean and efficient service-oriented government that has scientifically defined functions and satisfies the people. We should deepen the reform of the system concerning matters subject to government examination and approval, continue to streamline administration and delegate more power to lower levels, and make the government better perform its functions of creating a favorable environment for development, providing quality public services, and maintaining social fairness and justice.

The reforms have involved several areas. First, government agencies are to promote greater division of functions and rationalization of administrative procedures. Second, the delivery of public services must match better the needs of recipients and ensure social justice. Third, administrative personnel must be recruited through a process based on meritocracy and demonstrate competence in their duties. Fourth, the delegation of responsibilities to local government must be conducive to and enhance industrial development and administrative efficacy.

What did these broad reform goals mean for GASCs? First, one-stop services were expected to expedite the approval process for commonplace public requests by streamlining the approval process and assigning greater approval authority to front-line administrators working from 'service windows.'

Second, the different departments associated with GASCs were expected to coordinate their individual functions so as to minimize procedural conflicts, information asymmetries, and assist service window functions. Finally, public administrators were expected to deliver 'customer-oriented' public services that enhanced the overall satisfaction of the public in their use of such services.

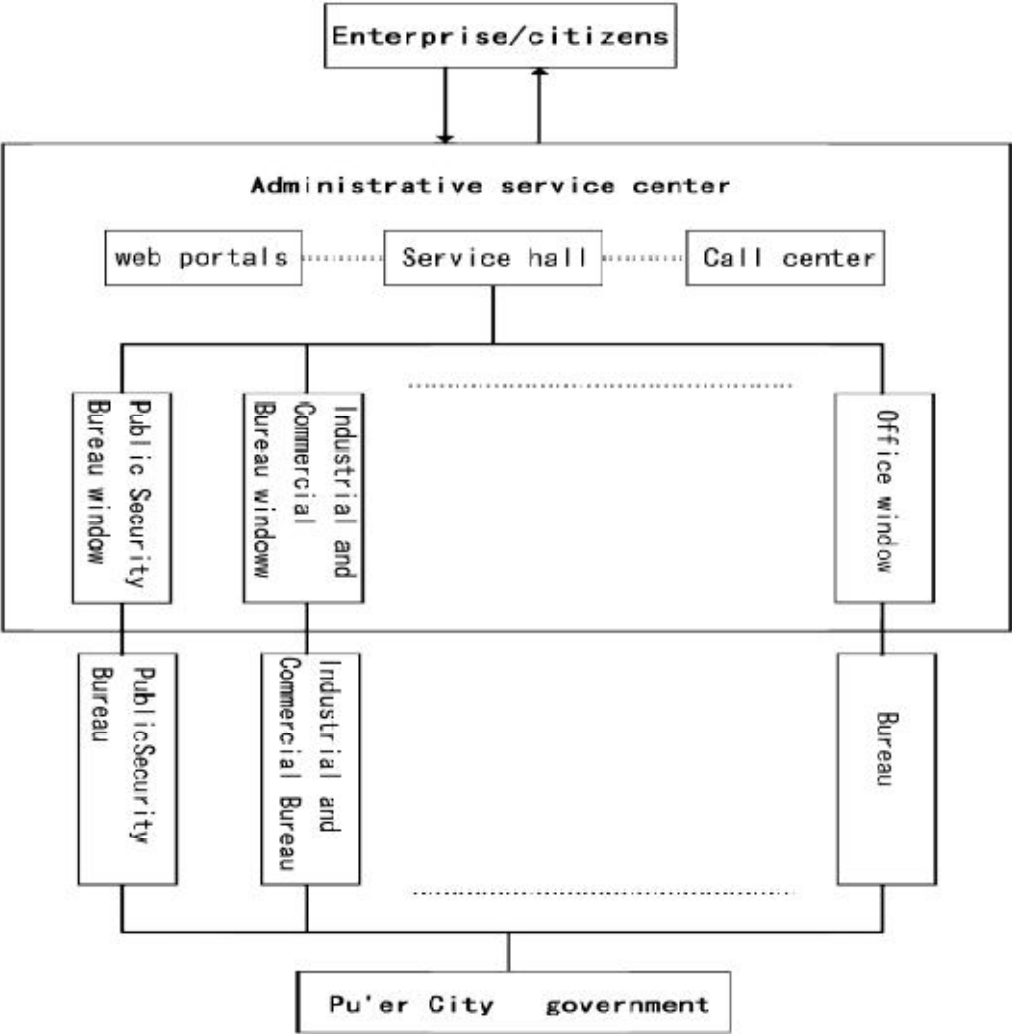
3. Administrative Reforms in the City of Pu'er

The city of Pu'er established a municipal GASC and a county-level branch center in November 2002. As a formal government agency the GASC encompassed 24 functional government departments incorporated in 2012.⁵ There were 513 errands or tasks relating to administrative examination and approval and 48 errands relating to government affairs service. Whereas the municipal GASC accounts for approximately 4% of request examination and approval, the county GASC accounts for about 55% (Pu'er Daily 2012).

Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between the GASC units and its constituent bureaus. From a legal and administration-ranking standpoint, GASC is equal and parallel to other functional government bureaus. There is no subordinate-superior relationship between GASC and other bureaus. In practice, however, the GASC's ability to perform one-service functions has been often undermined by bureaus that were reluctant to coordinate with the GASC. Consequently, GASC units have performed primarily a "receive and send" role whereby the processing and approval of requests were completed by administrators layers away from service windows. Furthermore, there has been a lack of standardized procedures relating to the examination and approval of requests, information asymmetry has been common between GASC units and bureaus, and there has been insufficient monitoring of the different units comprising the administrative system.

⁵Among the 24 departments are: development and reform commission, public security bureau of civilaffairs, industry and information technology commission, bureau of land and resources, bureau of living and building, bureau of traffic transportation, bureau of water department, bureau of business, bureau of agriculture, bureau of forestry, bureau of health, bureau food and drug administration among others.

Figure 1: Schematic View of the GASC System in Pu'er



In light of these deficiencies, the Pu'er municipal GASC commissioned research institutions in 2012 to carry out reviews of the system and make recommendations about how to improve the processing of public requests. The objects of the ensuing reforms were to work into the GASC system such public administrative practices as information flow efficiency, streamlined and standardized procedures, regularized supervision and monitoring; and mechanisms such as feedback links, accountability, and incentives compatibility.

The institutional reforms improved the overall performance of the Pu'er municipal GSAC as Tables 1 and 2 show. Table 1 illustrates that the number of errands processed rose sharply within a year (Pu'er City Government 2013; Pu'er Daily 2014). The share of requests settled at the GSAC's service windows (on-the-spot) also increased. The number of days it takes to approve economic investment-related requests has been cut drastically. In the first half of 2014, the GSAC processed 34 investment projects, totaling 11.4 billion renminbi, a sizeable improvement from previous years (Pu'er Newsletter 2014). What is more, online processing time was cut by 50%, and all individual inquiries submitted received a timely replied from the GSAC.

Table 1: Effects of Administrative Reforms

	2012	2014
Number of GASC departments	24	32
Number of errands processed	169,521 ^a	563,185
Share of requests settled	<55%	90%
Share of cases settled on-spot	0	30%
Approval time for investment	650 working days	80-150 working day

Note: (a) data is for 2013.

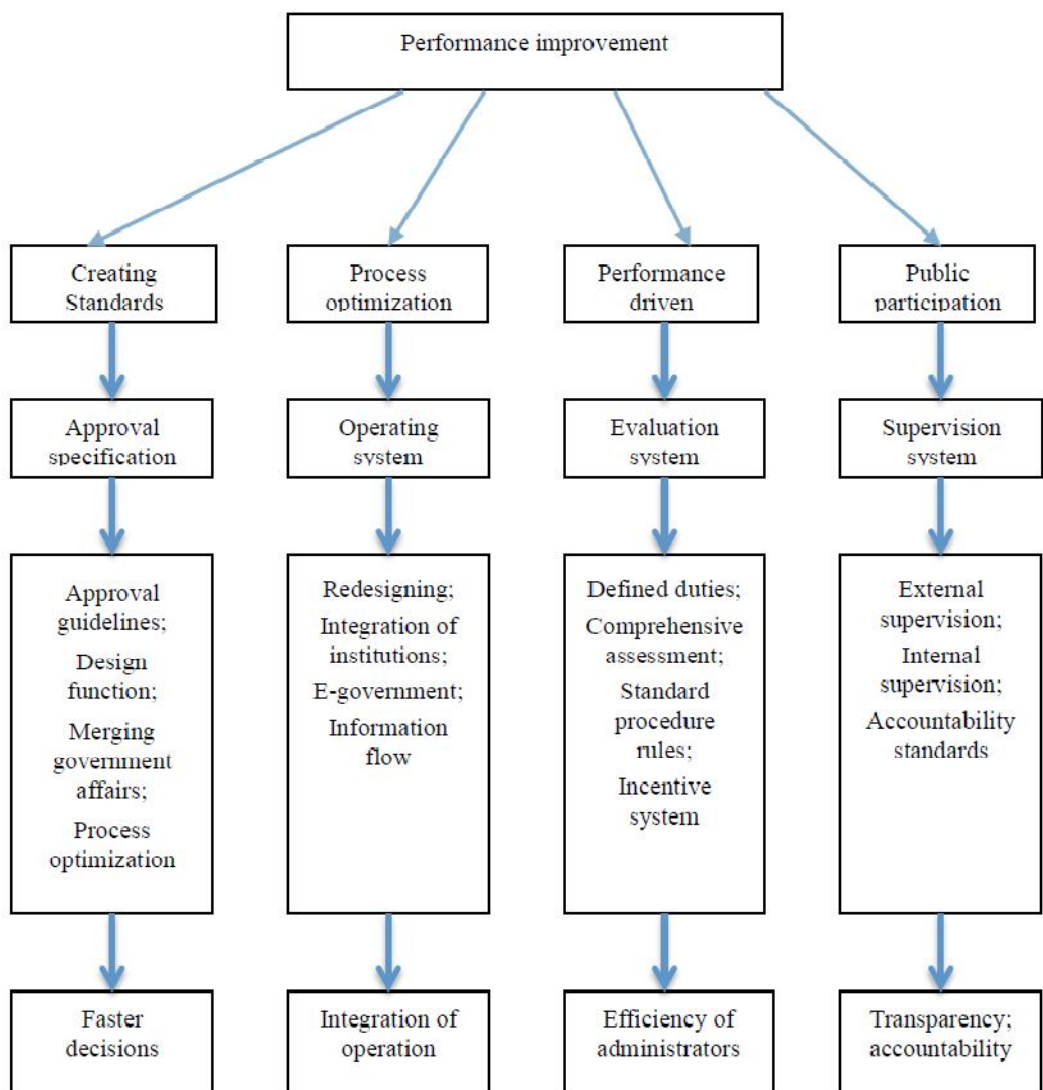
4. Analyzing Reforms

What specific reform measures contributed to these positive effects? Figure 2 illustrates the four areas of the GSAC that were the target of reforms: creating standards for vetting and approval of requests; optimizing organizational flow; establishing performance criteria; and enhancing public participation. The reforms involved updating or introducing a system with defined guidelines and achievements in each of the targeted domains of GSAC.

In order to expedite the examination and approval process of requests, the reforms instituted a number of changes. First, a range of examination and approval tasks was shifted from functional bureaus to the service windows of each bureau.

The delegation of such tasks was coupled with the allocation of decision-making authority to bureau representatives working in the front-line. Second, the process of approval was streamlined by reducing the number of signed approvals from different levels, and time limits were established to quicken approval process. Third, new classifications and specifications were drawn up in order systematize the handling of errands, and approval

Figure 2: Performance Improvement Objects and Strategies



Criteria was set so as to limit the discretion of administrators. Finally, new request forms were created, and checklists were devised to aid customers when filing out forms and determining what materials are needed to complete a request. One of the immediate

Table 2: Pu'er GASC Performance Scoreboard

	Evaluation content	Score
<i>Organizational attributes of service windows</i>	Chief representative for duty on time (5 points)	5
	Staff for duty on time (2.5)	2.37
	Number of telephone complaints without answering (2.5)	2.36
<i>Government Public Affairs attributes</i>	Systematization of approval process (2.5)	2.5
	Information publicity (2.5)	2.5
<i>E. government information system attributes</i>	Availability of online information (3)	3
	Integration/exchange of data (4)	4
	Information sharing relating to approval matters (3)	3
<i>Staff training attributes</i>	Pre-service training participation (2)	2
	On-the-job training (3)	3
<i>Service specification attributes</i>	Requests containing necessary supporting materials (3)	3
	Sticking with protocol (3)	3
	On-the-spot, one-time information provision (3)	3
	Approval according to regulation (5)	5
<i>Business consulting attributes</i>	Quality of consulting (2)	1.8
<i>Cleanliness</i>	Absence of clutter in service area (3)	2.5
	Sanitary conditions (3)	3
<i>Inter departmental coordination attributes</i>	Coordination among lead department (3)	3
	Functionality of coordination process (3)	3
<i>Timeliness of request processing</i>	Errands completed on time (2)	2
	Errands completed in advance (4)	0.8
<i>Reducing approval time</i>	Reducing steps in process (3)	2.1
	Optimize use of time (3)	2.7
	Shorten the time limit (3)	2.1
<i>Conduct of personnel</i>	Politeness (0.5)	0.1
	Communication skills (0.5)	0.5
	Harmonious relationship (0.5)	0.5
<i>Appearance and manners of personnel</i>	Grooming (0.5)	0.4
	Dress code (0.5)	0.4
	Service manners (0.5)	0.4
<i>Public assessment</i>	Satisfaction level (10)	8.3
<i>Abiding by rules</i>	Compliance with work specifications (2)	2
	Attendance (1)	0.97
<i>Information reporting</i>	Managerial compliance (1)	1
	Notification of receipt (2)	2
	Status report updates (6)	5.8

Results of these reforms was that the share of requests approved on the spot increased significantly and approval time was sharply reduced.

To deal with requests involving two or more departments, such as requests involving investment projects, parallel examination and approval procedures were established (Sader 2000). Furthermore, the processing of investment projects was systematized—divided into such stages as project proposal, feasibility study, preliminary design, project commencement, project completion, with each stage subject to evaluation. The key effect of adapting the investment-related review process was that total procedures involved in the process were reduced by nearly 100 and processing time was reduced from nearly two years to less than six months. In sum, the reforms optimized system operation.

Performance related improvements were achieved by undertaking the following reforms. First, functional roles and their related duties were defined. Second, administrators' actions were to follow set working procedures. Third, standards and methods of evaluations were established. Evaluations were to occur regularly in accordance to qualitative and quantitative benchmarks (for example, the number of complaints), and to ensure the professionalism and credibility, a combination of inside and outside evaluations are used. Detailed quantitative evaluation rules are used to evaluate all the departments and staff by month, quarter, and year. Personnel training is ongoing so as to improve consistently the quality of the services rendered by administrators. Finally, an incentive system comprised of promotions, relocations, salary raises, and disciplinary actions are used to ensure maximum performance of administrators. Administrative efficiency has improved as a result of the implementation of these evaluation measures.

Administrative supervision was another area addressed by the reforms. The new supervision system incorporated a number of mechanisms such as anti-corruption warning system, a public complaint system, and personnel monitoring. The supervision department, heads of departments, and supervisors near service windows carry out internal supervision. Outside supervision mainly involves the publics' evaluation of administrators, which they can make known using the comment box and service phone.

Furthermore, the media and social organizations can play a role in promoting external supervision by reporting allegations of corruption and commenting on the quality of administrative service. The overall effects of these supervisory changes are that it has increased transparency and accountability.

5. Conclusion

The Chinese Communist government has committed itself to improving the quality of public administration service at all levels of government since the early 2000s. As it often occurs when national governments undertake deep structural reforms after a long period of institutional stasis, the first round of administrative reforms faced a number of setbacks. One of the new administrative tools to emerge from early reforms was the Government Affairs Service Center, which was designed to create a one-stop service administrative interface allowing citizens to complete requests in a more efficient and time saving fashion. However, from the outset, GASCs across China encountered various structural and procedural shortcomings that impaired information flow, interdepartmental coordination, quality of public service, and experiences of citizen consumers.

The GASC in Pu'er city, as well as other cities around China, opted to undertake another round of reforms in the wake of the national government's renewed efforts in 2012 to perfect all layers of public administration in the country. This study explored the experience of Pu'er in its quest to adapt its municipal GSAC and county branch. By inserting modern public administration models, methods, and practices, the city was able to produce immediate and positive changes to how the GASC performed. The performance scoreboard and other quantitative indicators strongly indicate that the reforms have improved the speed of vetting and approving requests, transparency, and efficiency, as well as enhanced process optimization and administrative efficiency. As other cities undertake administrative reforms, the experience of Pu'er may serve as an insightful model to emulate.

References

- Chen, S. (2006). Analysis of the mechanism of Administrative Service Center on the reform of the Administrative examination and approval system. *Chinese Public Administration*, 4, 36-39.
- Guo, J. (2007). Insist on the reform of the administrative system to promote administrative service mechanism innovation. *Chinese Public Administration*, 12, 6-7.
- Kubicek, H., & Hagen, M. (2006). One-Stop-Government in Europe: An overview. [Online] Available: <http://www.egov.au.2006-06>.
- Lu, W, & Chen, H. (2008). A Research on the difficult problem of the development of the National Administrative Service Center and its strategies. *Journal of Gansu Administrative Institute*, 6, 119-123.
- Pu'er Daily. (2014). Administrative Service Center handling matters 66006 the first half of the year 2014. [Online] Available: <http://www.puer.gov.cn/zthd/dj/01821769270622813303>.
- Pu'er Government Service Management Bureau. (2013). The Effectiveness of government construction work, self-examination. Report on the first half of 2013. [Online] Available:http://pe.xgk.yn.gov.cn/Z_M_011/Info_Detail.aspx?DocumentKeyID=3A331procedure steady operation. [Online] Available: http://pe.xgk.yn.gov.cn/Z_M_011/Info.
- Sader, F. (2000). Do "One-Stop Shops Work? Foreign Investment Advisory Service, The World Bank Group. [Online] Available: <https://www.wbginvestmentclimate.org/uploads/Do+One+Stop+Shops+Work.pdf>.
- Schellong, Alexander, & Man, D (2004). Citizens preferences towards on-stopgovernment. [Online] Available: http://dgre.org/dg02004/disc/postem/tuesposters/p_schellong.pdf.
- Wu, A, & Sun. C. (2004). The difficulties and the development of China's public administrative service center. *Chinese Public Administration*, 9, 60-65.
- Zhang, W. (2006). Analysis on Administrative Service Center functions and development. *Chinese Public Administration*, 2, 34-37.