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CONCEPT OF GOVERNANCE IN PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA: PERCEPTIONS AND EVOLUTION

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Abstract

The goal of this paper is to present a literature review about the concept of 'Governance' within the Chinese context. When it comes to Chinese governance, most of the studies are centered in corporate governance. Despite it is a relevant topic, this is not part of this literature review scope of analysis. Instead, this paper focuses on Chinese contemporary political governance, both at internal and external levels, from 1978 until 2022. The research gap this literature review seeks to answer is if Chinese governance is reshaping the current global order or fitting into it. There is no academic consensus regarding this matter, neither from the field of Chinese studies, nor from political sciences. Mainly two different tendencies emerge from scientific community: (i) one advocating peaceful rise and China as a 'status quo power'; and (ii) the other one advocating 'China threat' as a reality. Factors that evidence both of them are analyzed in this paper that reconfirm the ambiguity of China's position towards Chinese governance and its position in global order.

Keywords

Governance, global order, multilateralism, status quo power, revisionist.

Resumo

O objetivo deste artigo é apresentar uma revisão de literatura sobre o conceito de 'Governança' no contexto chinês. Quando se trata de governança chinesa, a maioria dos estudos centra-se na governação corporativa. Apesar de ser um tema relevante, não faz parte do âmbito de análise desta revisão de literatura. Em vez disso, este artigo centra-se na governação política contemporânea chinesa, tanto a nível interno como externo, de 1978 a 2022. A lacuna de investigação que esta revisão da literatura procura responder é se a governação chinesa está a remodelar a actual ordem global ou a enquadrar-se nela. Não há consenso académico sobre este assunto, nem no campo dos estudos chineses, nem nas ciências políticas. Principalmente duas tendências diferentes emergem da comunidade científica: (i) uma que defende a ascensão pacífica e a China como uma "potência de status quo"; e (ii) o outro que defende a "ameaça da China" como uma realidade. Os factores que

evidenciam ambos são analisados neste artigo, que reconfirmam a ambiguidade da posição da China em relação à governação chinesa e a sua posição na ordem global.

Palavras-chave

Governança, ordem global, multilateralismo, poder do status quo, revisionista.

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Introduction

Due to the fact that societies are dynamic and, as a consequence their arrangements and needs change over time, politics and ways of governing must adapt over historic periods. As most of societies in Western countries are already embracing neo-liberalism since a long time, the term 'government' has slightly changed into 'governance', over the last decades, as neo-liberalism ideologies started to reform the way governments behave. As pointed out by Levi-Faur (2012: 27):

> "The plurality of the modes of control reflect and reshape new ways of makingpolitics, new understanding of institutions of the state and beyond the state and allow us to explore new ways for the control of risks, empowering citizens and promoting new and experimentalist forms of democratic decision-making".

Amongst several different definitions of 'governance' according to the sphere of scientific area to which researchers belong, there is a common factor that is transversal to all of them: the factor of change, mostly referred in literature as 'shift'. The point is to understand what kind of shift we are dealing with (Levi-Faur, 2012).

China has also shifted from 'government' to 'governance' itself. However, due mostly to cultural aspects in interpretation of concepts, its position regarding inner and global governance is not very clear. Although different perspectives will be outlined in the findings section, from this literature review, it is possible to trace most common tendencies in all analyzed papers: (i) the difficulty to understand China's position and goals in international society; (ii) its primacy for national interests over foreign policy; (iii) its soft power and non-interference strategy; and finally, (iv) the different conceptions of multilateralism and power.

Thus, this article is structured in the following way: this introduction is followed by the methodology section, explaining the pathway for the procedures of this research, followed then by the findings section, which is divided into main areas of analysis emerging from the literature review – (i) governance; (ii) new global order; hegemony vs. multilateralism; (iii) status quo power vs. revisionist power associated to global governance. Finally, the conclusions section emphasizes the key ideas on the overall analyzed topic, which is the concept of 'governance' in China and its evolution from 1980's until current days, concurring for the reshaping or preserving of current international order standards.

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1. Methodology

This paper highlights the main characteristics of Chinese political governance and its role in global order. The conclusions emerge from a literature review that was conducted based on a primary search of articles in Scopus Elsevier scientific database. The choice of Scopus as central database for this documents search is due to the fact that it is to be one of the most relevant scientific database in social sciences domain, specifically in the area of public policies, englobing the most well-reputed journals. Two combined set of keywords were used in order to obtain the range of papers to be selected. In one hand, searching for the expression "Chinese governance", 81 articles were found. On the other hand, searching for "People Republic of China", plus "governance", 359 results were found. Some articles were the same in both combination of keywords used for the search, so duplicated papers were removed and from the remaining universe of articles, a selection was carried out according to some established criteria: the ones containing "China" and "governance" in the keywords and the most cited ones (>90 citations). So, following these criteria definition and after a first read of abstracts and keywords, 21 journal articles were selected according to their relevance for the theme of governance and to the historic period under analysis (from 1978 to 2022), that is to say from the Chinese reform of opening-up until current days. The research strategy englobing the steps herein mentioned is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Steps of research strategy

Source: own elaboration

The final 21 selected articles were read in depth and categorized according to their scope. Some additional scientific literature was taken into account after the reading of the core set of 21 articles, in order to better frame the context and analysis itself.

In the next section, the concepts will be assessed according to "Chinese specificities" and their relations of causality and interdependence; they will be described to obtain an overview of the role of governance in contemporary China.

2. Findings

As already indicated, the literature review was carried out according to the scope of the analyzed articles, which were categorized in accordance with the main perspective developed by the authors. Then, several approaches were found in the existing literature: (i) the concept of governance itself in its core meaning; (ii) the concepts of 'Chinese threat' and 'peaceful rise; and (iii) governance associated with new global order. All of these approaches are fully developed in sections below.

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2.1 Concept of governance

There are many definitions of the term 'governance', however it is hard to find in literature one that is completely precise and unambiguous due to the different perspectives from which it can be described: political science, public policies, public administration, international relations, economy and so on. In this paper, our assumptions will be based in the assumption defended by Rhodes (1996: 652), which is that governance implies a "change in the meaning of government, referring to a new process of governing; or a changed condition of ordered rule or the new method by which society is governed". As per Jie Lu (2015:5), "governance is conventionally understood as the exercise of power to structure, regulate, and coordinate the relationships among the populace in the management of their public affairs. In addition, Michel Foucault, a French social theorist, developed a similar concept – 'governmentality' – as "a means of understanding shifts in relations between knowledge, power and subjectivity in the context of early modern Western societies" (Sigley, 2006: 490).

According to the United Nations (2012), the principles of good governance are: (i) participation; (ii) rule of law; (iii) transparency, responsiveness, equity, and inclusiveness; (iv) orientation to consensus; (v) and finally, accountability. By its turn, the Asian Development Bank has set out four basic elements of good governance in major part similar to the previous ones: (i) accountability; (ii) predictability; (iii) participation; (iv) and transparency (Lahtinen, 2010). The accumulated knowledge provided by years of research in this topic leads us to also acknowledge that institutions have a critical role to play in governance (Jie Lu, 2015).

Regarding the specificity of the concept applied to Chinese case, we can trace a brief historical trajectory of its evolution from the birth of People's Republic of China (1949) until current days. Actually, Mao Zedong – Chinese CCP leader from 1949 onwards – challenges the Western-dominated global governance, counterweighting with the core guiding principles of Chinese foreign policy even until today – the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. After the reform of opening-up in 1979, China started to adhere to international institutions standards and "adapted many domestic laws to conform to those of other countries" (CFR, 2023). In the sequence of Chinese great economic progress, its role in global governance was enhanced, with China even creating in last two decades its own multilateral and regional arrangements, as well as governance institutions, such as the ASEAN, the BRICS, the Shangai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank (NDB), taking part then as a rule-maker (CFR, 2023; Noesselt, 2022). However, also at local levels, governance suffered a restructuration as Chinese villages faced a significant rural-to-urban migration of population seeking better benefits frequently associated to urban areas (Jie Lu, 2015).

To better understand Chinese application of governance mechanisms, one should understand primarily the politics and ideology of socialist market economy and all its components in a separated way, and the new challenges it poses, such as: the 'glocal' politics, the emergence of 'community building', the emergence of concepts of 'choice' and 'citizens' participation' in policies, and moral conduct, as well. Nevertheless, to understand Chinese governance implies also understanding non-liberal contexts and more particularly "the complex socio-historical terrain of modern China" (Sigley,

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2006:489). In fact, in Chinese government's discourses, a socialist market economy does not require a 'retreat of the State'; instead, it requires a changing in its approaches by combining wisely neo-liberal and socialist strategies (Sigley, 2006). The Party itself perceives its action in a different way: from a 'revolutionary' Party to a 'ruling' one whose commitment is now, amongst other duties, to lead to a government that is 'service-oriented' (Sigley, 2006; Palmer and Winiger, 2019).

Despite a certain degree of acceptance of neo-liberal ideals, translated by the progressive acceptance of international accounting practices and the membership into neo-liberal institutions and international organizations, like World Trade Organization, World Health Organization, amongst others, the government is very assertive in its conviction that the market economy requires a strong and powerful political system and, thus, the State should not retreat, but should 'regroup' and implement governance in a 'socialist manner' (Sigley, 2006). The Chinese concept of governance incorporates then elements of market-oriented economic reforms and state-led development (Hu, 2020). Overall, one can observe that across time, from Mao (and even previously in imperial periods) to contemporaneity, Chinese system of governance have been a unique balance between authoritarianism, centralization; and political and administrative decentralization (Bardhan, 2020).

This mix of neo-liberalism and authoritarianism acquires a particular dimension in Chinese case, but this is not an exception, as it is possible to observe in Sigley (2006: 491): "In the case of China, it is crucial to understand that although Maoist socialism, for example, may seem as far removed from systems of Western liberalism as one can imagine, all 'modern' systems of government are cut from the same cloth". This crucial aspect leads us to questions of global governance and new global order that are treated in next sub-section.

2.2 New global order: hegemony vs. multilateralism

The period of emergence of academic studies about the 'China rise' was in the first decade of new millennium, because previously international society had not realized the proportion of such phenomenon and the consequences of China's rapidly growing economy for global order and, particularly, global governance. Currently, there is no doubt, namely in academic field, that China is a new agent in global governance, whether it pretends to be as such or not.

The point is to assess to what extent it leads to a peaceful and harmonious global order or to a conflicting one, or even, in another perspective, to a hegemonic power or a multilateral one (Gu *et al*., 2008). Currently, under Xi Jinping leadership – which is more assertive than previous leaders – China affirms that the established institutions serve the agenda of Western powers and are, for that reason, somehow obsolete (Drysdale, Triggs and Wang 2017; Krign and Gallagher, 2019). In fact, China's position is to combat any form of unilateralism or hegemony, defending true multilateralism, advocating for more equitable, effective and inclusive global development with a view to sharing the future of development that lead to the current President Xi Jinping motto of "community of shared future for mankind" (Athar, 2021).

Independently of the pathway followed, the point is that China already constitutes a huge competitor for the access to energy and natural resources worldwide. Besides that, China has big amounts of currency reserves, and investments in foreign sovereign debts, so its

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decisions in this field can create a huge impact in international order. Finally, it is important to outline that the country also plays an important role in environmental issues, as it is responsible for a big proportion of world's greenhouse gases emissions (Erbach and Jochheim, 2022).

To analyze these aspects and respective impacts, various authors have indicated in their studies three main schools of thought: realism, liberalism, and constructivism. From the realist perspective, every rising power tends to impose its ideology and materialistic power (Friedberg, 2005) and China is not different, such as Mearsheimer (2001: 400) said: "China, like all previous potential hegemons, [will] be strongly inclined to become a real hegemon". According to this perspective, China is not likely to achieve a peaceful rise; it is instead seen as a threat that challenges the hegemonic power of United States of America (Gu *et al*., 2008). Indeed, in recent years, especially after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the world has been witnessing a growing tension and rivalry between the two countries: what was initially only seen as a trade war, soon derived into some political tensions with the Taiwan question, the case of Xinjiang alleged violation of human rights, the use of narratives such as the "Chinese virus" and a number of other episodes of tension.

In turn, the liberalist perspective tends to see an interdependent order, derived from an economic interdependency between trading states. The key aspects of liberalist point of view are mutually reinforcing mechanisms, such as: (i) economic interdependence; (ii) international institutions; (iii) and democratization (Friedberg, 2005). In the case of China, liberalists tend to defend the concept of 'peaceful rise' as they believe that bilateral or multilateral economic exchange promotes shared interests and good relations which aims at preserving peace and avoid any kind of conflict (Friedberg, 2005). Regarding international institutions, numbers are revealing: People's Republic of China has been increasing its membership in international governmental institutions and in international non-governmental organizations, as well. For example, between 1977 and 1997 the membership of formal governmental institutions, according to Friedberg (2005) increased from 21 to 52. Even the issue of democratization as perceived in the West is for the liberalists, especially for the most optimistic wing, just a question of time. In fact, according to liberalism ideology, a rising per capita income leads to habits of freedom, which in turn leads to democracy (Friedberg, 2005).

Finally, from the constructivist perspective, all political relations are 'social constructions' that are not only the result of trade and economic transactions, or even of material factors like military forces and institutions, but also the result of intangible factors, namely: cultural identities, strategic beliefs and norms (Wendt, 1999; Mendes, 2012). Thus, concerning China, the more it is embedded in global institutions, the more its objectives will comply with universal standards represented by these institutions (Friedberg, 2005). China is currently a major player in world politics and should assume itself as such. Its performance in terms of global governance is now much more at stake, because "with great power comes great responsibility" (Friedberg, 2005).

2.3 Status quo power, revisionist one – what to expect relating to global governance

In literature, one finds essentially two divergent thoughts about China's position in global governance. One related to China's 'peaceful rise' and another related to what is called

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as 'China threat', as already referred. This one has emerged at first and is, for the majority of its defenders, inevitable. Indeed, Kagan (2005: 1) uses history to state that:

> "The history of rising powers, however, and their attempted "management" by established powers provides little reason for confidence or comfort. Rarely have rising powers risen without sparking a major war that reshaped the international system to reflect new realities of power".

Thus, according to this perspective, China is a conservative state that aims to a revisionist reform in global governance and, consequently, has to be contained by current powers of global order (Callahan, 2005). As China is a rising power, it is by definition dissatisfied with United States' hegemony according to *real-politik* argument (Johnston & Johnston, 2013). Besides that, revisionist powers in their more radical position normally reject the primary institutions of international society, as they do not identify themselves with their ideological bases (Buzan, 2010). Indeed, despite it aligns with some old institutions especially in the UN agencies, China also belongs to recent economic and political arrangements, especially regional ones such as the BRICS and the ASEAN (Stuenkel, 2020). In a rapidly changing international order, new arrangements especially involving the Global South (developing countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean) have arisen; China has actively sought to strengthen its ties with these countries through various diplomatic, economic, and developmental initiatives and the so-called South-south cooperation in an attempt to counter-balance the hegemony of the Global North (Alden *et al*., 2005; Gray and Gills, 2016).

On the other hand, there is the reverse thought, the one which emphasizes China peaceful rise. This involves an accommodation to the rules of international society and institutional structures and a re-adaptation effort of established powers in order to adjust to new disposition of power as well (Buzan, 2010). According to Gonzalez-Vicente (2015:96): "In its attempt to present itself as a benign power, the Chinese state has elaborated a discourse that separates diplomatic aspects from other interrelated dimensions, such as economics, politics at scales other than the interstate system, society and culture".

In addition, based on Chinese culture, there is a spirit of individual's sacrifice for the greater good of the group, which can lead to the famous parable used in games theory, the Prisoner's dilemma (Wang, 2016). As one evidence of Chinese effort to comply with the norms of international arena, it has been increasing its responsible membership in international organizations at regional and global levels, as a way of proving its intention to rise peacefully and comply with the status quo order (Callahan, 2008). The compliance with status quo order is one consequence of current Chinese priority to sustain the economic development achieved so far, adopting a dual-circulation model in its 14th Five-years Plan for sustainable development (Javed *et al*., 2023).

To achieve this economic sustainability, China needs stability in international relations, both at the regional and at the global levels and this leads to a shift in policies from Mao Zedong revolutionary character and antagonism regarding Western-dominated status quo, to Deng Xiaoping's policy of scientific development within the status quo order (Buzan, 2010). By its turn, the objective of President Hu Jintao leadership (2003-2013) of having a harmonious society and, by extension, a harmonious world is no more sufficient to sustain the continuation of peaceful rise (Buzan, 2010).

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The concept of community itself has been re-valorized and transformed into a specific institutional model within systems of governance (Bray, 2006). From 2000 onwards, the community is designated as "the basic unit of urban social, political and administrative organization", originating a new rationality of urban governance, overall after the massive migration of peasants and rural workers into urban areas in 1980's (Bray, 2006). Facing new challenges like increased demands for child care and elderly assistance, the central government has expanded the scope of community services even into areas including "culture, health, environment, education, morality, policing, grassroots democracy and 'Party building'" (Bray, 2006). Communitarianism is then seen as a flexible new technique of governance. It is even extrapolated to foreign policy through Xi Jinping motto of "Community of Shared Future for Mankind", which represents a vision for global cooperation and solidarity, aiming to address common challenges and promote a more inclusive and prosperous world for all. Its implementation and effectiveness will depend on the willingness of countries to engage in genuine dialogue, mutual respect, and collective action (Chen, 2021; Zhao, 2018).

The "Community of Shared Future for Mankind" is not limited to government-to-government cooperation, but also extends to people-to-people exchanges, cultural dialogue, and mutual understanding. It encourages collaboration in areas such as trade, investment, science and technology, education, and cultural exchanges, with the goal of fostering harmony and common development (Zhao, 2018).

While the concept has gained traction in certain international forums and has been embraced by some countries, it has also faced criticism and skepticism. Critics argue that the community of shared future may be used to advance certain countries' geopolitical interests or to promote a particular vision of global governance that may not align with the principles and values of all nations.

3. Discussion/ Conclusions

Governance is a complex concept because it englobes various fields of analysis. This literature review analyzed the concept and its relation with two major topics that derived from the in-depth reading of the selected articles: the new global order (hegemony vs. multilateralism) and the kind of position that China assumes in this global order (status quo vs. revisionist power). The new global order might be translated into a transition from a unipolar world order whose hegemony belongs so far to the United States of America, to a multipolar world power composed by United States, Europe, China, Africa and other developing states mainly from the Global South.

The definition of 'governance' considered in this study was the one given by Tony Saich (2004: 22) as it relates directly with political science domain: "the functioning of government institutions and administrative departments to the broader issues of how individual citizens, groups and communities relate to the State". Regarding the specificity of the concept applied to Chinese case, it results from a range of characteristics, but we can point out the main influential one, that is: the combination of a capitalist economy with a one-party ruled, socialist and authoritarian political system, which challenges the global governance status quo. In fact, at the global level, neo-liberal principles regarding global governance remain dominant and if China continues to pursue its political nationalism with emphasis on 'China Dream' values, then its governance is likely to be more efficient and influent at the regional level, especially in the Global South. It is quite

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difficult to characterize China's position as a developing country aiming at fairer trade conditions for other nations in the same case, tending thus to be a revisionist power; or, on the contrary, an emerging power with its own interests in the maintenance of the current order, shouldered by the World Trade Organization, being, for such reasons, a status quo power. One can argue that during Maoist period, China was a revolutionary revisionist power, while since the reform of opening-up and mostly since its entry into World Trade Organization in 2001, it tends to be acting more in accordance with a status quo power, in a logic of 'peaceful rise'.

According to this literature review, it is possible to conclude that, starting from the late nineties, and especially after 2001, China has been assuming a pragmatic and apolitical model of governance, in an attempt to demonstrate the possibility of success of alternatives to the Western dominant neo-liberal modes of governance; despite it is, at the same time, adopting some new liberal techniques of governance. Finally, regarding the research goal that oriented this study, it is possible to conclude that taking into consideration the various perspectives observed in this review, it is quite difficult to define China as a revisionist power or as a status quo power, because it presents a combination of characteristics that pertain to both and it has been very successful in this blend of features that turns Chinese governance so peculiar.

For now, its main concern is its national governance issues in order to secure the Party-State's main goal of economic growth sustainability, equitable distribution of income, social cohesion and harmonious society with a revival of socialist values and Confucian morality. In order to achieve this, translating its national growth into political bargaining power, China is considering the global order and the 'peaceful rise' strategy as a subtle way to obtain, at first, its domestic goals. It is then possible to conclude that, for the near future, despite great progression in its path, China has a long way ahead to construct a stronger sense of international society and mature its governance mechanisms.

This literature review identified the major aspects of governance applied to Chinese context and suggests that more works would be interesting to be conducted with the purpose of shedding light on other dimensions of the concept, namely on public and private governance, e-governance and meta- governance.

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