

# **Citizen, Customer, Partner: What Should Be the Role of the Public in Public Management in China?**

Min Su

Doctoral Candidate of Public Management and Policy  
Georgia State University & Georgia Institute of Technology

## **Abstract**

In his book “*Citizen, Customer, Partner: Engaging the Public in Public Management*”, Thomas (2012) states that members of the public assume three principal roles relative to public management: as customers, as partners, and as citizens. The public sometimes come to government as *customers* seeking a discrete product or service usually for its personal value to them. At other times, they coproduce a service together with the government, acting as *partners* with government. On still other occasions, members of the public may exercise a responsibility as *citizens*, deliberating about the nature of public programs and their implementation. This paper examines how this model applies to Chinese public management.

Today’s public managers in China face more managerial challenges than their predecessors. Traditional Chinese society has been highly centralized marked as “strong state, weak society.” Building upon this base, China has formed a state-centered governance paradigm, which views government as a monopoly system rather than the construction from democratic consensus. Under this governance paradigm, public managers have taken it for granted that “the ruler rules and the ruled listen.” The public has little voice in public management (Lan 2000, p.460). In the recent few years however, the Chinese public, led by a rising middle class, have been constantly requiring participating in the policy making, implementation, and management of public affairs. This paper examines whether the “citizen, customer, partner” model applies to the current public management practice in China.

## **The Public as Customer**

Thinking about the public as customers of government developed in the 1990s as a component of the New Public Management reform. Proponents of the customer perspective

believe that the market mechanism such as competition can improve the quality of public services and the overall government performance. In the United States, many local governments have instituted the “311” call centers. The simple three-digit number can direct all public’s inquires to the right agencies. Similar initiatives can be observed in China, such as the “12319” urban service hotline and the “12345” government complaint hotline. Some case studies have shown that those hotlines make governments more responsive, and improve citizen satisfaction with government. Information collected by the hotlines could be converted and automatically imported to the customer/citizen relations management (CRM) system. The GRM system provides public administrators a reliable source of information for performance monitoring. It also provides public administration scholars potential “gold mines” to analyze the data in order to better understand what services does the public want—or not want—from government? And how good a job does the public feel government is doing in providing specific services? So far, we have not found evidence from any news report or academic study showing that governments in China have adopted such GRM system. We would recommend governments that have already been using the hotlines also institute this GRM system to maximize the potential of the hotlines.

### **The Public as Partner**

#### *Case: Microblogs Combat Child-Trafficking*

*In China, thousands of children are snatched and sold every year to desperate, usually boy-less couples. Government authorities have launched several crackdowns in the past two decades, but the crime has persisted. To combat child-trafficking, parents and activists have been using microblogs to share information about cases and draw public attention to child abduction. Chinese public-security ministry has encouraged police to join internet groups that*

*discuss child abductions and to engage with members openly. The police actively use information provided by microbloggers to track child-trafficking suspects (Zhou 2013).*

In this case, members of public in China collaborate with the police to fight against child abduction crime. Public officials and public administrators need to recognize the reality that nowadays, in almost every function where government is involved, it requires contributions from the public. Public administrators should view themselves as lead partners in service development and delivery rather than the sole providers.

### **The Public as Citizen**

#### *Case: Land Requisition in Guangzhou*

*The Guangzhou Development District (GDD) was established in 1983 and continued to expand in the 1990s. In 2004, to support the construction of Guangzhou Science City in the GDD, the city government announced to relocate several villages that were within the planning boundaries of the project. To implement their campaign, the GDD authority strategically targeted the village leaders as a focal group, because village leaders' attitudes towards government policies had a tremendous influence on their fellow villagers. They also provided public meetings, hotlines, and suggestion boxes to inform villagers about their compensation and resettlement arrangement. Yet, some 20 households remained unsatisfied with the government compensations and they hired a lawyer to take legal action against the GDD. However, the GDD officials convinced the lawyer to withdraw from the appointment (Tang, Wong et al. 2008).*

The GDD land requisition is considered as a “successful” land requisition example as there were no violent clashes during the process (Tang, Wong et al. 2008). But as a citizen participation case, it is far from success. There were some limited ways of engaging villagers

including public meetings, hotlines, suggestion boxes, and village leader representations. However, this sort of citizen participation was aimed at compliance rather than consultation. The GDD officials encouraged villagers to participation in the hope that they would support the land requisition proposal and all opposition could be removed. Such community involvement was not directed to identifying alternatives, but rather to justify the already-made decisions.

## **Conclusion**

This paper began with the premise that the public should be viewed as assuming three principal roles relative to government: as *customers* and *citizens* and *partners*. The three roles separately and in combination probably describe most interactions between the public and public managers. Although the model of viewing public's role as citizen, partner, and customer is derived from theories and practices in the Western world, judging from cases profiled in China, we find that many Chinese public administrators already know how to engage the public and interact with the public successfully in these roles. This implies two kinds of good news: First, this model could be applied to public management in Chinese context. Second, public administrators might take encouragement from their "pioneer" exemplary peers who have successfully interacted with the public in the three roles.

## **References**

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