

Government Work Reports: Securing State Legitimacy through Institutionalization

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Abstract

Relying on fieldwork conducted in two provinces, this article provides a systemic study of China's Government Work Reports (GWRs), examining their function, format, how they are formulated and implemented, their content and their research values. Whilst the existing literature mostly focuses on central government reports, this research integrates GWRs from all administrative levels. I argue that over time, the GWRs have developed into a highly institutionalized nationwide system with two important aspects – local elites' autonomy in setting work agendas, and their compliance with central government policy priorities. Additionally, my study shows that by using quantifiable targets and celebrating achievements framed in concrete statistics, the GWRs help to sustain the legitimacy of the party-state. Finally, my study finds GWRs to be a versatile scholarly resource that can be used for various research interests and methods.

Keywords: government work report; performance/cadre evaluation; policy implementation; local autonomy; compliance; institutionalization; China

Every year in March at the annual plenary session of the National People's Congress, the Chinese premier delivers the Government Work Report (*zhengfu gongzuo baogao* 政府工作报告, hereinafter GWR or the Report) that is sometimes compared to America's State of the Union address.¹ As it contains important indicators of Beijing's socio-economic policies for the year, this document receives much attention from the media.² There lacks, however, an in-depth study of the overall GWR system, how it functions, its development, its political significance and its potential research value.

A large number of studies focusing on the Reports, both scholarly and non-scholarly, have emerged within China over the last decade. These studies more

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1 See, e.g., Bleiberg and West 2015.

2 See, e.g., [bbc.com](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-31743598). 2015. "China's Premier Li Keqiang sets out economic goals," 5 March, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-31743598>. Accessed 16 January 2016.

or less employ one approach: they use textual analysis of the Reports to examine the emergence, frequency and patterns of key words and phrases in order to gauge policies and changes. Of these studies, some focus on the Report for a single year to identify important events or new policies.³ Some studies compare Reports across time to gauge the broader social and political trends in China.⁴ Additionally, some studies trace the development trajectories of a particular policy, such as multilateral diplomacy,⁵ social security,⁶ Taiwan,⁷ competitive sports,⁸ and so on. This existing Chinese literature helps to illuminate that GWRs are a barometer of China's changing political and economic context and renders important clues to understanding government and Party policies, but it focuses almost exclusively on the Reports of the central government despite the fact that local Reports actually constitute the majority of the GWR system.⁹

Drawing on field research conducted in Hubei and Anhui provinces and on Chinese sources, this article provides a systemic analysis of the GWR system integrating Reports of all administrative levels. My central argument is that, over time, the Reports have developed into a highly institutionalized system with consistent publication, open access, a uniform format, and established procedures for formulation and implementation. I also argue that the GWR system features two important aspects – local elites' autonomy in setting work agendas, and their compliance with central government policy priorities. Additionally, my study shows that by using quantifiable targets and celebrating achievements framed in concrete statistics, current Reports help to sustain the legitimacy of the party-state. Finally, my study finds GWRs to be a versatile scholarly resource that can be used for various research interests and methods.

This article begins with a brief overview of the function and history of GWRs, followed by analyses of their format, how they are formulated, their content, and implementation. The conclusion discusses the potential ways of utilizing GWRs as a research source for China scholars as well as the political significance of the Reports.

Function

The current GWR is an annual document issued by every government in China, from the central down to the township level. Villages may also produce their own Reports, but doing so is not mandatory. Regardless of administrative levels, Reports from all governments serve the same function within their own jurisdictions – evaluating the performance of the previous year and outlining work for the current year.

3 See, e.g., Liang and Huang 2015; Qing 2007.

4 See, e.g., Geng and Yang 2010.

5 See, e.g., Peng 2005.

6 See, e.g., Zheng 2006.

7 See, e.g., Xu, Yayuan, and Mao 2013.

8 See, e.g., Mou, Zong and Mou 2013.

9 Zhu and Jin's (2012) study of provincial GWRs is a notable exception.

The GWR system is said to have originated in the former Soviet Union, and was later formally adopted in China with assistance from the Soviets.¹⁰ The very first central government Report was delivered by Premier Zhou Enlai 周恩来 in 1954. By 2015, a total of 47 central GWRs had been issued. Between 1954 and 1977, the production of GWRs was erratic owing to the disruption from the political turmoil of the time; however, since 1978, the Reports have been consistently issued every year. Given the large number of local Reports, however, further verification is needed to see whether they have all followed the same pattern. Moreover, current Reports are officially a public document and are available either at local government websites or through local yearbooks.¹¹ Overall, the consistency and accessibility of GWRs indicate a deeply established system.

Format

All Reports adopt a uniform format that often consists of three main sections.¹² The first section represents an evaluation of the work performed by the government in the previous year. It is largely devoted to reviewing and highlighting the work accomplished by the government, and the accomplishments tend to be presented in concrete facts and statistics. It is not until the very end of this section that the Report engages in a very cursory discussion of the challenges and problems encountered during the previous year, and the language tends to be rather obscure. This uneven focus on achievements versus problems suggests one essential feature of GWRs: they are created to celebrate successes and motivate citizens, not to confront drawbacks and difficulties. Zhu Guangxi and Jin Dongri also confirm this point in their study of provincial GWRs. They assert that on average the self-criticism portion only constitutes 1.96 per cent of the entire Report, and that even when human or natural disasters are documented in the Reports, they tend to be portrayed in a positive light by focusing on after-disaster rescue measures taken by the government instead of lessons to be learned or problems to be confronted.¹³

The second section is where the government sets out the overarching development guidelines for the current year and articulates the core work targets in concrete statistics, such as GDP growth rate and energy consumption reduction, etc.

10 “Zhengfu gongzuo baogao suyuan” (Tracing the origin of GWRs), *Wuhan Evening News*, 7 March 2010, <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2010-03-07/021419806155.shtml>. Accessed 16 January 2016; “Zhengfu gongzuo baogao lishi: cihui cong ‘douzheng’ zhuan ‘hexie’” (The history of GWRs: changing vocabulary – from “struggle” to “harmony”), *Legal Evening News*, 6 March 2010, <http://news.qq.com/a/20100306/002196.htm>. Accessed 16 January 2016.

11 My experience suggests that annual central, provincial- and prefectural-level GWRs are consistently available online but that county- and township-level ones are less consistent and may need to be obtained through fieldwork. Nevertheless, all GWRs are officially public documents and are usually available upon request.

12 Although the 2015 central government Report changes to six sections, the overall flow and logic remain the same.

13 Zhu and Jin 2012, 129.

The third section of the GWRs divides the guidelines of the second section further into several major tasks and specifies the details of what each of these tasks entails.

Although the Reports now prefer to utilize quantifiable indicators and statistical data to define work targets, this preference is a rather new phenomenon. For instance, Liu Xiaobiao's analysis of central Reports reveals that the amount of data used in the 1983 Report was double that used in the 1978 one.¹⁴ This change shows that the GWR system has followed the path of the broader political and economic change in the country in that the emphasis has shifted away from abstract political ideology and towards concrete work performance and productivity.

Formulation

Like their uniform format, the formulating process for GWRs is remarkably similar across administrative levels and geographic locations. The Report is usually drafted by a designated writing team (*qicao banzi* 起草班子) within the general office of each government (*zhengfu bangongshi* 政府办公室). As the local government head must orally present the final Report draft for enactment at the annual people's congress plenary session, he or she often leads the work of the writing team. The formulating work takes months to complete and generally consists of the stages outlined below.

The first stage begins with outlining the Report's overall framework and selecting the major themes to be covered. At this stage, the designated writing team must consult leading local officials to ensure that their priority issues are addressed in the Report. Meanwhile, the team also studies important meetings,¹⁵ speeches and documents of upper-level governments to stay abreast of their top policy concerns and their guiding principles (*zhidao sixiang* 指导思想) on those policy concerns.¹⁶ Throughout this stage, the team makes sure that the finalized themes for the Report not only reflect the priority concerns of the local government but also are in line with the directives of higher-level governments.

What occurs at this stage indicates two forces at work: local autonomy and compliance with central policy priorities. Local autonomy grants leading local officials a substantial degree of authority in articulating what constitutes the work agenda in the Reports so as to accommodate the unique conditions of local economic and social development. In fact, the consideration given to local conditions is regarded as the most fundamental guideline for drafting the Report.¹⁷ However, compliance with central policy priorities implies that a local GWR must defer to the guiding principles of higher-level governments.

14 Liu 2008.

15 Interviewees suggest that the Central Economic Work Conference (*zhongyang jingji gongzuo huiyi*) is especially important. Interview with prefecture-level official, Fuyang, 18 June 2014; interview with county-level official b, Gonggan, 29 May 2014.

16 For example, the five-year plans of both the national and local governments and of important economic sectors.

17 Interviews with various prefecture-, county- and township-level officials, Hubei and Anhui, May–July 2014.

As a Chongqing official commented, “A successful municipal GWR must have yearly features, reflect central spirit (*zhongyang jingshen* 中央精神), and most importantly, relate to local realities.”¹⁸

Having decided upon the major themes that drive the Report, the writing team moves on to the next stage, investigation and research (*diaoyan* 调研), which mainly involves requesting information from the government’s functional departments (*zhengfu zucheng bumen* 政府组成部门). The requested information consists of three parts, largely resembling the format of the GWR: a summary of the previous year’s work; the major challenges and problems that occurred; and the work plans and targets for the current year.¹⁹ As an official of a prefectural functional department noted, “The work in the GWR is actually submitted by ourselves. It is simply that we propose the things to be done; if the mayor agrees, these things will be formalized through the Report as our work.”²⁰ Again, this fact underscores the high degree of local autonomy in formulating the Reports.

After all the requested information is submitted, the designated writing team integrates it into the major themes of the Report and produces the first draft, often referred to as the suggestion-seeking draft (*zhengqiu yijian gao* 征求意见稿). This draft is subject to several rounds of revisions while it is distributed for feedback to various units (*danwei* 单位), ranging from functional departments, the standing committee of the local people’s congress (*renda changwei* 人大常委), the local committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (*zhengxie* 政协),²¹ to the minor parties, the Communist Youth League (*tuanwei* 团委) and the women’s federation (*fulian* 妇联).²² Lastly, a meeting of the local politburo standing committee (*changwei hui* 常委会), the highest level decision-making body, is held to discuss the revised draft. The designated writing team makes the last round of revisions based on the discussions in this meeting and produces the final draft.

Content

The content of GWRs also reflects the two forces inherent to the formulation process: local autonomy and compliance with central policy priorities. Most importantly, the specific content of the GWRs varies substantially across localities. This demonstrates that local governments have the autonomy to define their own work agendas for the GWRs. Specifically, this local variation exhibits in two major ways. First, local governments choose to focus on different issues for their main work targets for the year. Many examples of this variation abound.

18 “Jiemi shizhengfu gongzuo baogao chulu quanguocheng” (Revealing the secret process of municipal GWR), *Chongqing Business Daily*, 21 January 2010, <http://city.finance.sina.com.cn/city/2010-01-21/119805.html>. Accessed 16 January 2016.

19 Interview, county-level official b, Gonggan; Xu, Haocheng 2010.

20 Interview with prefecture-level official, Yichang, 8 July 2014.

21 Interview, county-level official b, Gonggan.

22 Zhu and Jin 2012.

For instance, in terms of the main socio-economic development targets for 2015, Hubei province lists population control as one of its main targets, while Anhui province does not.²³ Another prime example of local variation is the wide use of “ten concrete goals” (*shijian shishi* 十件实事) in local GWRs.²⁴ “Ten concrete goals” refers to the practice of laying out ten specific tasks to accomplish in the coming year and these tasks usually focus on people’s livelihoods and well-being. Despite the fact that many local governments adopt this format of “ten concrete goals,” the ten tasks vary greatly across jurisdictions. Second, there is local variation in how governments attach different values to the same work targets. For example, Anhui provincial government set its GDP growth rate for 2015 to be around 8.5 per cent,²⁵ whereas Hubei aimed to achieve beyond 9 per cent,²⁶ and Shanghai for the very first time did not specify a number for GDP growth rate.²⁷ Similarly, this variation also exists within provinces. For instance, also in 2015, while Hubei’s Gonggan 公安 county set its GDP growth rate at 10 per cent, “striving for 11 per cent,”²⁸ Jianli 监利 county aimed for 10.5 per cent.²⁹ Together, these variations indicate that local governments have autonomy in adopting their own target values.

In addition to local variation, the content of the GWRs features another key component – conformity with the central government’s policy priorities. This compliance with central directives is clearly demonstrated by the fact that all local GWRs, from provinces down to townships, incorporate every single target that the central government considers essential work for the year. For example, comparing the 2015 main socio-economic development targets of the central government,³⁰ Hubei province,³¹ and Lixin 利辛 county³² shows that except for the target of achieving a balance of payments, which only applies to the central

23 Hubei.gov.cn 2015; Ah.gov.cn 2015.

24 The number of “concrete goals” might differ across localities and time. For example, Chongqing municipal government’s 2010 Report used “ten concrete goals” but changed to 22 and 25 for the 2014 and 2015 Reports, respectively. Also, local governments might change the specific phrase for “ten concrete goals” from time to time. For example, Hubei provincial government discontinued using the particular title of “ten concrete goals” in its 2015 GWR as it claimed to make “serving the people” a “new normal,” but the content of “ten concrete goals” remains integrated into the Report.

25 Ah.gov.cn 2015.

26 Hubei.gov.cn 2015.

27 Sina.com.cn. 2015. “Shanghai zhengfu gongzuo baogao shuaixian quxiao GDP zengzhang mubiao” (Shanghai GWR being the first to withdraw GDP growth target), 25 January, <http://finance.sina.com.cn/china/dfjj/20150125/151421391869.shtml>. Accessed 16 January 2016.

28 Gonggan.gov.cn. 2015. “Government work report – delivered at the fourth session of the 16th county people’s congress by county head, Liu Zhongcheng,” 9 January, <http://www.gongan.gov.cn/jzgax/infodetail/?infoId=3c367786-ff62-4e32-bded-7ff15e3db43b&categoryNum=003005>. Accessed 16 January 2016.

29 Jianli.gov.cn. 2015. “Government work report – delivered by county head, Huang Zhen,” 24 January, <http://www.jianli.gov.cn/Government/PublicInfoShow.aspx?ID=244>. Accessed 16 January 2016.

30 Xinhuanet.com. 2015. “Full text: report on the work of the government,” 16 March, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2015-03/16/c_134071473.htm. Accessed 16 January 2016.

31 Hubei.gov.cn 2015.

32 Lixin.gov.cn. 2015. “Government work report – delivered at the fourth session of the 11th county people’s congress on February 7, 2015 by county head, Cheng Xiulue,” 19 February, http://www.lixin.gov.cn/gov/show_news.php?id=28878&S_ty=187. Accessed 16 January 2016.

government, all the other seven targets of the central government have been adopted, although with different values, by the provincial and county governments in their own GWRs. This finding indicates that although GWRs vary in content across localities, they are also unified in that their main targets are structured one way or another in line with the priority agendas of the central government.

Both the formulation and content of GWRs suggest that the Reports have evolved into a system that not only grants local governments plenty of discretion in selecting issues and defining the values for their work targets, but also ensures that this discretion is exercised in a way that is consistent with the central priorities for the year.

Implementation

Once the final Report draft is enacted by the local people's congress, the government employs multiple mechanisms to help implement the work laid out in the Report. First of all, the government breaks down the Report into individual tasks and then assigns these tasks to the corresponding functional departments and subordinate governments. These assignments result in an elaborate document, often referred to as the "GWR targets broken-down document" (*zhengfu gongzuo baogao renwu fenjie wenjian* 政府工作报告任务分解文件). This document is distributed to all the government units involved so that everyone is on the same page in terms of whose work is what and when the work must be finished. Additionally, both the government and the Party have their own supervision and inspection office (*ducha bangongshi* 督查办公室) dedicated to enforcing the implementation of important projects and policies, including GWR targets. This office conducts regular inspections of functional departments and the progress of subordinate governments towards achieving the work targets in the Report and promulgates the inspection results.³³

Furthermore, in recent years, to help ensure completion of GWR targets, governments also tie the work progress of functional departments and subordinate governments to annual performance evaluations (*jixiao kaohe* 绩效考核).³⁴ The evaluated units and their leading cadres are ranked against each other based on how well they have performed on the GWR targets. Monetary rewards and career benefits, such as being given priority for promotion or important exchange positions, are offered to those with higher rankings while those with the lowest rankings are summoned for questioning and criticism (*jiemian tanhua* 诫勉谈话) and are subject to removal from leading positions or demotion.³⁵

33 Interview with county-level official a, Gonggan, 28 May 2014; interview with prefecture-level official, Jingzhou, 3 July 2014.

34 Interview, county-level official b, Gonggan; interviews with county-level officials b and c, Gonggan, 29 May 2014; interviews with prefecture-level officials, Fuyang, 18 June 2014, 19 June 2014; and Jingzhou, 3 July 2014.

35 See, e.g., "Lixin xian 2013 niandu gongzuo mubiao zonghe kaohe banfa ji ge danxiang gongzuo kaohe banfa de tongzhi" (The notice on the comprehensive evaluation methods for the 2013 annual work targets of Lixin county and the evaluation methods for individual work assignments), 21 April 2013;

Clearly, the material and career incentives built into the performance evaluation system help to induce timely completion of the Report targets.

Another mechanism that helps ensure implementation can be found in the workings of the people's congress standing committee. Although it is often dismissed as being little more than a rubber stamp for the Party's decisions, the people's congress has gained more power as a result of the Party's reform efforts towards the rule of law in recent years.³⁶ One such power is the authority to question and supervise the government on its progress in implementing important projects and policies, as stipulated in the "Opinions on improving the work of inquiring about special issues" (*guanyu gaijin wanshan zhuan ti xunwen gongzuo de ruogan yijian* 关于改进完善专题询问工作的若干意见), which was recently issued by the general office of the National People's Congress Standing Committee.³⁷ My investigation of Gonggan county also finds that, in September of each year, officials from the local people's congress standing committee would inspect the government's progress on its implementation of the "ten concrete goals," as articulated in the local GWR. These officials conduct on-site visits, examine how much work has been completed and how much more needs to be done, evaluate the quality of work, make recommendations as to how to improve work, and write up reports. The responsible government units then take action to address the detected problems and eventually submit a response report to the local standing committee of the people's congress.³⁸

These concrete implementation mechanisms attest to the highly institutionalized nature of the GWR system, and indicate that the Reports are not just empty rhetoric but have real consequences for the material and political interests of officials.

Conclusion: Research Value and Political Implications

My analysis of GWRs demonstrates that they have transformed from a sporadic practice into a largely institutionalized system nationwide. The consistency and accessibility of GWRs make them one of the rare means by which to obtain information and gauge policy changes from a regime that is notorious for its poor record of data reliability. Specifically, GWRs can assist scholars with systematic data collection, conducting reliable comparisons across localities and

footnote continued

"Gonggan xian jixiao kaohe gongzuo lingdao xiaozu guanyu yinfa 2014 niandu xiangzhen jixiao kaohe gongzuo shishi banfa de tongzhi" (The notice on the implementation methods for the 2014 annual performance evaluation of townships by Gonggan county performance evaluation work leadership team), 21 May 2014.

36 Yang 2004, 221.

37 Npc.gov.cn. 2015. "Zhuanti xunwen renda jian du geng youli" (Inquiries on special issues, more effective supervision by people's congress), 10 April, http://www.npc.gov.cn/npc/bmzz/rdcwbg/2015-04/10/content_1932536.htm. Accessed 16 January 2016.

38 Interview, county-level official a, Gonggan.

administrative levels, and producing generalizable findings. Furthermore, as current Reports tend to use quantifiable targets with numeric values, scholars looking for statistical data can find GWRs a valuable resource. Additionally, as a system characterized by both local autonomy and conformity to central government priorities, GWRs provide ample empirical evidence for scholars interested in either national policies, local politics or intergovernmental relations.

Other than its research value, the Report system carries great political significance. First, the development trajectory of the Reports signals the Chinese Communist Party's capacity to learn, adapt and reinvent itself. By standardizing the GWR system, the government also has institutionalized the annual practice of celebrating its prior accomplishments, which helps to promote a can-do and caring image for the Party state. This image in turn cultivates a public consensus of authoritarian meritocracy and aids in sustaining the ruling legitimacy of the Party.

Biographical note

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摘要: 基于对两个省的实地考察和调研, 本文系统地研究了中国政府工作报告——包括它的功能、格式、如何被制作完成和实施、内容及其研究价值。现有的相关文献多是侧重于中央政府工作报告, 而本文的研究则涵盖了从中央到地方的所有层级。本文的主要观点是: 随着时间的推移, 政府工作报告已经发展为一个全国性的、高度制度化的体系, 而且这个体系呈现出两个突出特征——地方政府精英对规划本地政府工作重心的自主性, 和对中央政府大政方针保持的高度一致性。此外, 本研究发现, 政府工作报告通过坚实的数据量化本年度准备完成的工作目标和上年度的成就, 以此来巩固政府的执政合法性。最后, 研究显示, 政府工作报告中详实多样的各种数据和内容对从不同领域和利用各种方法研究中国的学者都提供了海量的资源。

关键词: 政府工作报告; 政绩/干部考核; 政策实施; 地方政府自主权; 服从; 制度化

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