

Study on the reform dilemma and reform path of administrative examination and approval bureau

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Abstract

The transformation of government functions is the key to comprehensively deepening the reform in China, and the reform of the administrative examination and approval Bureau has played an important role in the process of implementing the "separation of audit management". This kind of reform can effectively promote the construction of our country service-oriented government, has the important rule of law significance. As a new thing, the Administrative examination and approval Bureau, which originally served as a service center, has faced a series of difficulties in the process of promoting reform, including the fuzzy scope of examination and approval items, the lack of professional quality of examination and approval personnel, difficulties in departmental coordination, the unclear division of examination and approval and supervision, and the lack of effective supervision. There are many reasons behind these difficulties, such as conflict of interest, unitary reform mode, restriction of administrative management system and lack of consensus on the direction of reform. In order to overcome these difficulties, a series of measures can be taken, such as promoting local legislation, improving the professionalism of examination and approval personnel, promoting information sharing, and strengthening internal and external supervision, so as to better promote the reform of administrative examination and approval bureaus.

Keywords

Reform of the administrative examination and approval bureau, Service-oriented government, Dilemma analysis, Countermeasure study.

1. Introduction

The 18th National Congress of the CPC emphasized the importance of simplifying administration and delegating power, recognizing the transformation of government functions as fundamental to deepening reforms in China. The 19th National Congress report of the Communist Party of China further emphasized the need to reform institutional and administrative mechanisms to transform government functions effectively, streamline administration, innovate supervision methods, enhance government credibility and execution, and build a people-oriented government. As part of this effort, the reform of centralized administrative licensing power has been highlighted as a crucial direction for administrative mechanism reform. However, this reform has faced challenges and undergone an evolution from "service centers" to "administrative examination and approval bureaus."

Following the reform and opening up, the outdated administrative examination and approval system inherited from the planned economy proved inadequate for meeting the needs of local governments in attracting investment for economic development due to its fragmented nature. In response, local governments introduced one-stop administrative examination and approval agencies with "service centers" and established a centralized examination and approval mechanism for foreign investors involving multiple departments. The reform of the administrative approval system initiated by The State Council since 2001 also supported this

approach. While the service center initially streamlined application processes, it lacked the authority for final approvals, leading to increased administrative costs, unresolved inter-departmental conflicts, and difficulties in addressing conflicting interests.

Recognizing these issues, Meishan City and Zhenjiang City undertook further reforms in 2004 by consolidating administrative licensing power into a single internal agency within the service center. However, this did not completely resolve the fundamental disconnect between approval power and items. With the enactment of the Administrative Licensing Law in 2004, the concept of relatively centralized administrative licensing power was clarified, providing a legal basis for establishing Administrative Examination and Approval Bureaus. These bureaus serve as dedicated departments for exercising administrative licensing power transferred from various government agencies, aiming to streamline functions and enhance efficiency and quality of administrative processes.

The establishment of Administrative Examination and Approval Bureaus, starting with Wuhou District of Chengdu in December 2008 and later expanding to other regions like Binhai New Area of Tianjin, marked significant progress in administrative reform. This model has been adopted by various levels of government to improve examination and approval efficiency. The Pilot Work Plan for the Relatively Centralized Administrative Licensing Power, issued by the Office of the Central Commission for Public Reform and the Legislative Affairs Office of The State Council, aims to explore the feasibility of this reform and chart the path for Administrative Examination and Approval Bureau reform. This reform is seen as a potential mainstream paradigm for China's administrative mechanism reform, offering solutions to deep-rooted issues like "responsibility isomorphism" and "segmentation." However, challenges remain due to lack of experience and practical constraints in implementing these reforms.

2. Legal significance and theoretical basis of the reform of the Administrative Examination and Approval Bureau

2.1. The legal significance of the reform of the Bureau of Administrative Examination and Approval

2.1.1. Reorganize functions and further improve the supervision system

In the traditional setup, administrative license examination and approval power were dispersed among various government departments based on the nature and categories of the items requiring approval. This fragmented system led to overlapping functions and complex approval procedures, often necessitating applications to pass through multiple departments. Consequently, responsibility for approving administrative licenses was shared among different departments, creating opportunities for buck-passing. Moreover, the integration of approval and supervision functions meant that supervisory tasks that should have occurred post-approval were merged into the pre-approval stage. This integration was evident in the imposition of pre-approval conditions or requirements, effectively replacing post-approval supervision with upfront approval[1].

The traditional administrative license examination and approval system failed to achieve a clear separation between approval and supervision duties, resulting in inadequate oversight of post-approval activities. However, through the reform of Administrative Examination and Approval Bureaus, the consolidation of permission powers from various administrative departments enables the separation of pre-approval and post-supervision tasks. This restructuring compels the government to innovate its management practices, establishing a power operation mechanism where approval and supervision powers complement and regulate each other, reducing the risks of corruption associated with approval processes.

By implementing these changes, the requirements for constructing a service-oriented government can be effectively met, transforming the administrative license approval process into a service-oriented task conducted in accordance with the law. Functional reorganization enhances the standardization of the approval process, ensuring procedural fairness and shifting the focus of government departments towards post-approval supervision to strengthen the oversight system. This shift towards a more streamlined and transparent process not only improves the efficiency of administrative approvals but also enhances the government's ability to monitor and regulate post-approval activities effectively[2].

2.1.2. Reorganize functions and further improve the supervision system

The reform of the large department system, also known as the reform of the large ministry system, aims to integrate administrative licensing matters with similar nature and functions, addressing the challenges posed by the dispersion of administrative license approval powers across various departments. This restructuring establishes specific functions and powers within designated departments, streamlining government internal structures and mitigating issues arising from multiple leaderships, thereby reducing administrative approval costs to align with the requirements of constructing a service-oriented government. Additionally, this reform minimizes coordination costs between departments and enhances the professionalism of administrative license examination and approval processes.

China has embraced this guiding principle in administrative organ reform, effectively consolidating administrative license examination and approval powers previously scattered among different government entities[3]. The ongoing reform of Administrative Examination and Approval Bureaus represents a departure from the initial "service center" model where each department operated independently. Through a comprehensive review of administrative license examination and approval items, the reform optimizes departmental functional configurations via management organization reorganization, service organization restructuring, and establishment reorganization to enhance the standardized and efficient operation of these bureaus.

In essence, the current reform of Administrative Examination and Approval Bureaus in China, by centralizing administrative permission powers within these bureaus and restructuring the original government departmental organizational framework, not only achieves the separation of approval and supervision powers and delineation of responsibilities but also offers valuable insights for future administrative examination and approval reforms in China. This reform serves as a significant example of the large department system reform, guiding the establishment of a service-oriented government and the deepening of administrative institution reforms.

2.1.3. Process reengineering, promote the modernization of governance capacity

The reform of the administrative examination and approval system has been a crucial component of the State Council's efforts to deepen administrative system reforms and transform government functions. By consolidating administrative examination and approval powers previously dispersed among various departments, the reform has empowered newly established Administrative Examination and Approval Bureaus to become the primary entities responsible for examination and approval processes, achieving the objective of centralized management and approval.

This restructuring has streamlined the approval process, eliminating the need for applications to be resubmitted to multiple departments for approval. Instead, applications now circulate within the Administrative Examination and Approval Bureau, reducing approval levels and enhancing the efficiency of the process. By optimizing the approval process through assembly line procedures, the reform has successfully addressed issues such as excessive documentation, redundant stamps, intermediaries, charges, and prolonged approval times.

Taking the example of the reform in Liaoyang Administrative Examination and Approval Bureau, significant improvements have been achieved. The establishment of the bureau in September 2016 involved the transfer of functions and powers from 24 administrative departments and 3 public institutions, resulting in the elimination of approval items lacking legal basis and a reduction of 125 approval items. The consolidation of approval windows into comprehensive acceptance windows, along with the implementation of electronic management, has increased online approval coverage to 75%.

Furthermore, the merger of 91 examination and approval departments into 15, coupled with a reduction in examination and approval personnel, has significantly enhanced efficiency[4]. The bureau's efforts have led to a substantial decrease in examination and approval links, a reduction in approval time limits by nearly 71.23%, and a significant increase in same-day approvals. These reforms have not only improved efficiency and reduced costs for applicants but have also optimized local government functions, advancing the modernization of governance capacity at the local level.

2.2. The theoretical basis for the reform of the Administrative examination and approval Bureau

2.2.1. Whole government theory

With the rapid development of global economy and science and technology, economic globalization and the general trend of e-government have a great impact on the traditional bureaucratic systems of various countries. In this context, in order to better serve the development of economy and society, the whole government theory built based on the goal of strengthening departmental cooperation and integrating public organizations has been gradually valued and widely applied in Europe and the United States. Specifically, this theory originated in the United Kingdom in the 1990s, aiming to solve the government failure caused by "administrative fragmentation" and the problem of "segmentation" among various departments, so as to better sort out the relationship between various departments and effectively improve the efficiency of cooperation between departments. This theory was later promoted to Western countries such as Australia and Canada. In the past a long period of time, China also has a relatively serious "administrative fragmentation" problem. Due to the relatively serious overlapping of responsibilities among various departments, there are often serious "segmentation" phenomena in the process of administrative license examination and approval, such as simultaneous acceptance by multiple departments, repeated examination and approval, and cross-examination and approval, which leads to the phenomenon of "kicking the ball" between different departments constantly, resulting in low approval efficiency. In order to better solve these problems, it is necessary to comprehensively implement the whole government theory, break the existing departmental conflict of interest dilemma through "one-window management" and other ways, and effectively promote the improvement of approval efficiency. This is also the main goal of the reform of the Administrative examination and approval Bureau[5]. However, in the actual reform process, due to the incomplete horizontal decentralization of authority and the lack of unified coordination between superior departments, different departments still face greater coordination difficulties in the process of administrative license examination and approval, coupled with the existence of information islands and other problems difficult to effectively solve, the whole government theory cannot be implemented in the reform of the Administrative examination and approval Bureau.

2.2.2. Service-oriented government theory

The whole government theory, originating in the United Kingdom in the 1990s and later adopted in Western countries like Australia and Canada, aims to address issues stemming from administrative fragmentation and departmental segmentation within government structures. By promoting departmental cooperation and integrating public organizations, this theory seeks

to enhance interdepartmental collaboration and boost operational efficiency. This approach has become increasingly relevant in the context of economic globalization, technological advancements, and the rise of e-government initiatives worldwide[6].

In China, as in many other countries, administrative fragmentation has been a longstanding challenge, leading to overlapping responsibilities among various departments and hindering effective coordination in administrative processes such as license examination and approval. This fragmentation often results in inefficiencies, including simultaneous acceptance by multiple departments, redundant examination and approval procedures, and delays caused by cross-departmental reviews.

To address these issues and improve approval efficiency, the reform of Administrative Examination and Approval Bureaus aims to implement the whole government theory by breaking down departmental silos through initiatives like "one-window management." However, challenges arise during the reform process due to incomplete horizontal decentralization of authority, lack of unified coordination among superior departments, difficulties in interdepartmental communication, and the presence of information silos.

These obstacles hinder the effective implementation of the whole government theory in administrative reform efforts. Overcoming these challenges requires comprehensive strategies to enhance horizontal coordination, streamline communication channels, promote information sharing, and establish mechanisms for unified decision-making. By addressing these issues, China can better leverage the principles of the whole government theory to optimize administrative processes, enhance collaboration among departments, and ultimately improve the efficiency and effectiveness of government operations.

2.2.3. Government process reengineering theory

The "New Public Management" movement, which emerged in European and American countries in the 1980s, introduced concepts from private sector management into government operations. This movement, based on process reengineering theory, emphasized the importance of cost management, customer-centric approaches, and the redesign of business processes using modern information technology to enhance efficiency and improve the quality of public services. Central to this approach is the idea of putting people first and ensuring that administrative processes are streamlined to effectively meet the needs of effective governance.

In the 1990s, this theory was gradually introduced to China and adapted to local contexts. Jiang Xiaoping and Wang Meng highlighted that government process reengineering aims to transform administrative departments' functional frameworks and business processes based on public demand. By enhancing the connection between decision-making and supervision functions within the government, this theory seeks to boost administrative efficiency and public satisfaction. Unlike traditional reform theories, government process reengineering prioritizes meeting people's needs and aims to overcome the fragmentation typically found in government departments[7].

The reform of the Administrative Examination and Approval Bureau, exemplified by the case of Liaoyang City, showcases the application of government process reengineering principles. By reducing approval links, consolidating approval windows, merging departments, and leveraging information management technology, the bureau has significantly improved efficiency, with online approval coverage reaching 75%. These reforms not only enhance approval processes but also increase public satisfaction by simplifying procedures and making services more accessible.

By embracing the principles of government process reengineering, governments can enhance their responsiveness to public needs, streamline operations, and deliver services more effectively. This approach underscores the importance of innovation, customer-centricity, and

the strategic use of technology in modernizing administrative processes and improving governance outcomes.

3. Analysis on the difficulties and causes of the reform of Administrative examination and Approval Bureau

3.1. Examination of the dilemma of the reform of the Administrative examination and approval Bureau

3.1.1. Legal basis: The scope of centralized examination and approval items is vague

The challenges faced by Administrative Examination and Approval Bureaus in China, such as encountering "empty periods" due to delays in law and regulation drafting and cleanup, highlight the importance of aligning administrative processes with legal frameworks. The current pilot programs focusing on exploring relatively centralized administrative licensing power aim to address these issues by studying which approval powers should be consolidated and to what extent. However, the lack of clear legal basis and guidance has led to divergent reform approaches, including "absolute centralization" and "relative centralization."

In instances of absolute centralization, all approval authority at a certain government level is transferred to the newly established Administrative Examination and Approval Bureau. This approach, exemplified in Xuyi County of Jiangsu Province, consolidates approval items from multiple government agencies under the bureau's jurisdiction. While this model simplifies the approval process, it can lead to concerns about the bureau's expanded power and potential for corruption[8].

On the other hand, the relatively centralized reform mode, as seen in Binhai New Area of Tianjin, involves consolidating approval powers from various departments under the Administrative Examination and Approval Bureau while retaining certain matters within the original departments. This approach aims to balance centralization with departmental expertise, particularly in areas like market regulation and tax registration.

The ambiguity in the Administrative Licensing Law and the Pilot Program regarding the scope of centralized approval items has resulted in uncertainty for Administrative Examination and Approval Bureaus. Without clear guidelines, bureaus struggle to determine the appropriate level of concentration for approval items, leading to discrepancies in centralized approval items across different bureaus.

To address these challenges and optimize the reform process, it is crucial to establish clear legal frameworks, provide specific guidance on the scope of centralized approval items, and promote consistency in the implementation of administrative reforms[9]. By enhancing transparency, defining roles and responsibilities, and fostering coordination among relevant departments, Administrative Examination and Approval Bureaus can streamline processes, improve efficiency, and uphold integrity in their operations.

3.1.2. Personnel construction: lack of professional quality

The challenges related to the relative concentration of administrative examination and approval matters in China highlight the critical importance of having well-trained and specialized personnel within Administrative Examination and Approval Bureaus. The complexity and multidisciplinary nature of these matters necessitate a high level of professional expertise among bureau personnel. However, the existing team often falls short of meeting these demands, leading to various issues in the reform process.

The transfer of approval matters to Administrative Examination and Approval Bureaus includes tasks that require not only basic qualification assessments but also in-depth professional knowledge. For instance, handling approvals for product production licenses or health licenses demands a thorough understanding of relevant criteria and equipment, which

can only be achieved by experienced professionals. As the reform is still in its early stages, personnel are typically transferred to the bureau along with the approval items, leading to a situation where new employees must quickly acquire necessary expertise. However, frequent personnel transfers and the lack of comprehensive training hinder the development of the required professional knowledge and skills, impacting the bureau's ability to carry out approvals effectively.

Moreover, the failure to transfer key departmental expertise during the reform process has resulted in a shortage of specialized talent within the newly established Administrative Examination and Approval Bureaus. This deficiency impairs the bureau's ability to conduct approvals efficiently and keep pace with evolving demands. Given the diverse and complex nature of approval items, personnel are expected not only to be proficient in their department's tasks but also to have a comprehensive understanding of the bureau's overall operations. This necessitates comprehensive training programs to enhance their capabilities.

The lack of familiarity with approval items from other departments among transferred personnel can lead to inefficiencies in the approval process, hindering the bureau's ability to achieve desired outcomes. Additionally, the expanded authority of Administrative Examination and Approval Bureaus, if not properly monitored, could increase the risk of corruption. This underscores the importance of instilling a strong sense of ethical consciousness among examination and approval personnel to uphold integrity and prevent malpractice[10].

To address these challenges, it is essential to invest in ongoing training and development programs for personnel, ensure the transfer of critical expertise during reforms, and establish robust oversight mechanisms to prevent corruption risks. By enhancing the professional capacity and ethical standards of examination and approval personnel, Administrative Examination and Approval Bureaus can improve efficiency, uphold integrity, and effectively meet the evolving demands of the approval process.

3.1.3. Operation mechanism: department coordination is difficult

Although the reform of the Administrative examination and Approval Bureau has effectively solved the original vertical problem of homogeneity of responsibilities, and has effectively adjusted the horizontal relationship between government departments, there are still serious problems of departmental coordination in the specific operation mechanism of the Administrative examination and approval Bureau, which is specifically reflected in the lack of smooth connection between vertical and horizontal examination and approval business.

Vertically, because the reform of the administrative examination and approval bureau is still in its infancy, the municipal and district-level administrative examination and approval bureaus have not formed unified standards in terms of examination and approval items, time limits, standards, and processes. The non-uniform examination and approval standards make the administrative counterpart need to run back and forth between the two levels of administrative examination and approval bureaus, and the administrative examination and approval bureaus cannot well implement the reform goal of allowing the administrative counterpart to run "only once". At the same time, the administrative examination and approval bureaus established in some provinces and cities lack superior departments, and only set up administrative examination and approval bureaus at the city or district or county level. As a result, when problems arise in examination and approval, the superior departments cannot be found to coordinate, and the superior governments of the functional departments at the same level can only communicate with each other, which increases the communication cost and affects the efficiency.

Horizontally, since the Administrative examination and approval Bureau still needs to cooperate with the original functional departments in the examination and approval business, and many municipal departments are directly led by the municipal government, such

horizontal business communication and coordination are faced with major problems. At the same time, the reform of the Administrative examination and approval Bureau has separated examination and approval from supervision. Although it is helpful to strengthen the supervision of examination and approval power, the information exchange mechanism between the Administrative examination and approval Bureau and the original functional departments has not been established at the same time, and all departments still use the original examination and approval private network. In reality, there are problems such as inconsistent standards, imperfect information infrastructure and high technical difficulty. It makes it difficult to effectively summarize the approval information and affects the effect of approval. If these problems are not properly addressed, it is very likely that the Administrative examination and approval Bureau established by the current reform will fall into the mold of the previous "service center" - only providing an intermediary platform, but unable to play a practical approval effect. This point has been fully reflected in the investigation of Zhenjiang Administrative Examination and Approval Bureau, the bureau interviewed staff pointed out: "The current examination and approval matters involve many links, such as examination, acceptance, on-site investigation, examination and approval decision, tracking and supervision, but in the actual work of the Administrative examination and approval Bureau, due to the lack of smooth communication channels for examination and approval information, the examination and approval business of each link can not be effectively coordinated, and there are big problems in communication with the original functional departments." Therefore, the problem of "fragmentation" has not been completely solved. At the same time, the Administrative examination and approval Bureau still needs to conduct effective coordination with these functional departments to promote the smooth progress of examination and approval in the actual examination and approval work in which the administrative examination and approval power belongs to the functional departments at the same level. In fact, there may be as many as 20 departments at the same level in need of coordination and docking, which seriously reduces the examination and approval efficiency[11].

3.1.4. Approval and supervision: The boundary between approval and supervision is unclear, and there is a lack of effective supervision

The effective separation of examination and approval from supervision is a crucial aspect of the reform of Administrative Examination and Approval Bureaus. However, in practice, the delineation between the two functions is often blurred, leading to challenges in ensuring effective supervision by these bureaus. The lack of a clear boundary between approval and supervision responsibilities hampers the ability of Administrative Examination and Approval Bureaus to effectively oversee the approval processes.

As the reform of these bureaus is still evolving, there is often ambiguity regarding the division of responsibilities between examination and approval and supervision. While Administrative Examination and Approval Bureaus primarily focus on administrative licensing power, the separation of approval and supervision functions within the same department creates challenges. Some former functional bodies may believe that supervision responsibilities should also be transferred to Administrative Examination and Approval Bureaus along with approval powers, potentially resulting in a lack of adequate supervision. This not only undermines the protection of the rights and interests of applicants but also deviates from the goal of establishing a service-oriented government.

Efforts to address the lack of internal and external supervision within Administrative Examination and Approval Bureaus include the implementation of electronic monitoring systems to self-regulate approval practices, such as ensuring timely completion of approval processes. However, the scope of these monitoring systems is often limited and may not comprehensively cover all approval items, diminishing the effectiveness of supervision efforts. While mechanisms for external supervision exist, including methods like public oversight,

Administrative Examination and Approval Bureaus may not always respond promptly or accurately to external feedback[12].

Moreover, the absence of a robust accountability mechanism further contributes to the challenges in ensuring effective supervision by Administrative Examination and Approval Bureaus. Without clear lines of accountability and consequences for lapses in supervision, the ability of these bureaus to oversee approval processes and safeguard the interests of applicants is compromised.

To enhance supervision effectiveness, it is essential for Administrative Examination and Approval Bureaus to establish clear boundaries between examination, approval, and supervision functions, strengthen internal and external oversight mechanisms, improve responsiveness to external feedback, and implement robust accountability measures. By addressing these issues, Administrative Examination and Approval Bureaus can better fulfill their role in ensuring transparent, efficient, and fair approval processes in alignment with the goals of administrative reform and the establishment of a service-oriented government.

3.2. Analysis on the causes of the reform dilemma of Administrative examination and approval Bureau

3.2.1. Difficulty reconciling conflicts of interest in reform

The reform efforts have dismantled the previous fragmented administrative system and consolidated approval powers, impacting the interests of various departments. This consolidation process also involves the transfer of key personnel from original administrative units, affecting not only departmental interests but also the career paths and interests of the transferred personnel. These changes can create tensions and conflicts between departments and individuals, disrupting the smooth operation of Administrative Examination and Approval Bureaus.

The conflicts arising from departmental and individual interests can impede the effectiveness of Administrative Examination and Approval Bureaus, manifesting in operational challenges and coordination difficulties among departments. The hidden conflicts between former administrative departments and the reform of Administrative Examination and Approval Bureaus can hinder the bureau's ability to function efficiently and achieve its objectives.

Furthermore, the lack of detailed guidelines in some pilot programs for the reform of Administrative Examination and Approval Bureaus can lead to rushed implementation by local managers seeking quick political achievements[13]. This hasty approach, without adequate preparation and planning, can result in suboptimal outcomes and even negative consequences for the reform efforts. Insufficient preparation and rushed implementation may exacerbate existing conflicts of interest and hinder the bureau's ability to deliver effective administrative services.

To address these challenges, it is essential for stakeholders to engage in transparent communication, address conflicting interests through dialogue and negotiation, and ensure that reforms are implemented with careful planning and consideration of all stakeholders' concerns. By promoting a collaborative approach, fostering understanding among departments and individuals, and ensuring proper preparation and implementation of reforms, Administrative Examination and Approval Bureaus can navigate conflicts of interest and achieve successful outcomes in line with the goals of administrative reform.

3.2.2. Single reform method

It is crucial for the ongoing reform of Administrative Examination and Approval Bureaus to be approached with flexibility and adaptability, particularly during the pilot phase. Rather than rigidly adhering to a fixed model coordinated by provincial governments, allowing grassroots

initiatives to play a significant role in the reform process can help ensure that reforms are tailored to local circumstances and effectively address the specific needs of each region[14].

The pilot program introduced in 2015 presented two primary schemes for reforming administrative approval processes: centralizing administrative approval powers either within a single department or transferring them between departments. The current reform efforts typically follow the first scheme, involving the centralization of administrative licensing powers in a single bureau. However, it is essential to recognize that there are various implementation modes for centralized exercise of administrative licensing power, including vertical centralization, horizontal centralization, decentralized centralization, separate centralization, and more.

Each region should not be confined to a single reform model, such as restructuring the Administrative Examination and Approval Bureau, in a mechanical manner. Instead, reforms should be tailored to the specific needs and conditions of the local government. By allowing local governments the flexibility to experiment with different approaches and continuously adjust based on their experiences, valuable insights and lessons can be gained to enrich the pool of reform examples. This iterative process of trial and adjustment can provide valuable guidance for optimizing future reforms of Administrative Examination and Approval Bureaus. By encouraging local experimentation, continuous evaluation, and adaptation based on local feedback, the reform of Administrative Examination and Approval Bureaus can be better aligned with the diverse needs and contexts of different regions. This approach can lead to more effective and sustainable reforms that improve administrative efficiency, enhance service delivery, and address the challenges faced by administrative approval processes at the local level[15].

3.2.3. Administrative system and mechanism constraints

The comprehensive reform of Administrative Examination and Approval Bureaus in China aims to overhaul the existing administrative management mechanisms, align with the principles of a service-oriented government, and redefine the distribution of functions and powers to enhance efficiency and service quality. However, the reform process encounters challenges stemming from the constraints of the legacy administrative system and mechanisms. One significant issue in the reform of Administrative Examination and Approval Bureaus is the presence of horizontal and vertical conflicts within the administrative structure. These conflicts can impede effective coordination and cooperation among relevant departments, leading to inefficiencies and delays in decision-making processes. Additionally, the existence of information silos and unclear boundaries of powers and responsibilities further complicates the reform efforts, hindering the establishment of a streamlined and transparent administrative system. The Third Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee emphasized the importance of promoting institutional reforms to drive changes in the administrative system and mechanisms. While there is a recognized need for reform, practical challenges and constraints persist, making it difficult to fully break free from the constraints of the original system and mechanisms, particularly in the context of Administrative Examination and Approval Bureaus. To address these challenges, it is essential to undertake comprehensive institutional reforms that go beyond superficial changes and address the root causes of inefficiencies and conflicts within the administrative system. This may involve clarifying and redefining power structures, enhancing coordination mechanisms, promoting information sharing and transparency, and establishing clear boundaries of powers and responsibilities. By tackling these issues head-on and implementing systemic reforms, the Administrative Examination and Approval Bureau reform can make significant progress towards achieving its objectives of enhancing efficiency, promoting transparency, and delivering better services to the public[16].

3.2.4. There is no consensus on the direction of reform

The debate surrounding the reform of the Administrative Examination and Approval Bureau reflects the complexity and diversity of opinions on the necessity and direction of reform efforts. While the reform aligns with the principles of the Administrative Licensing Law and represents a step towards centralizing administrative licensing power, there remain significant differences in perspectives regarding the effectiveness of establishing the Administrative Examination and Approval Bureau as the primary reform approach. The organized discussions among civil servants in 2016 highlighted a balanced split between supporters and opponents of the reform of the Administrative Examination and Approval Bureau. This division underscores the existence of valid arguments on both sides, indicating a lack of consensus on the best path forward for reform. The emergence of the "Alexander knot" phenomenon, where there is a desire to return to the original service center model, further complicates the reform landscape by introducing additional layers of complexity and differing viewpoints. The absence of a broad consensus on the reform of the Administrative Examination and Approval Bureau poses significant challenges to the advancement of further reforms in this area. Without a shared understanding and agreement on the necessity and direction of reform, efforts to drive meaningful change and improve administrative processes may face resistance and obstacles. To navigate these challenges and move forward effectively, it is crucial to engage in continued dialogue, foster open communication, and actively seek common ground among stakeholders with diverse perspectives. By promoting constructive discussions, addressing concerns, and seeking innovative solutions that consider a range of viewpoints, it may be possible to overcome existing obstacles and pave the way for more successful and sustainable reforms in the administrative examination and approval system.

3.2.5. Lack of confidence in reform and lagging ideas

The historical context of previous comprehensive law enforcement reforms, particularly the experience with the pilot work of centralized exercise of administrative punishment power in the late 1990s and early 2000s, has left many administrative cadres cautious and skeptical about the reform of the Administrative Examination and Approval Bureau. The initial efforts to centralize administrative punishment power through integrated law enforcement bureaus were met with challenges and discontinuations in some regions, leading to a return to the previous decentralized system of supervision and punishment. This regression was seen as contradictory to the goal of effectively and efficiently performing government functions.

The setbacks and failures experienced during the integrated law enforcement bureau reforms have created a sense of apprehension among administrative cadres, who fear that a similar fate may await the reform of the Administrative Examination and Approval Bureau. This lack of confidence stems from concerns about the sustainability and long-term success of reform efforts, especially in the face of past instances where reforms were reversed or abandoned.

Moreover, the prevailing regulatory mindset and emphasis on approval processes over service delivery in many local governments in China have further entrenched bureaucratic attitudes and resistance to change among administrative officials. The intertwining of approval and supervision functions, along with a culture that prioritizes power dynamics, presents significant challenges to shifting entrenched behaviors and attitudes within the administrative system. Addressing these deep-rooted concerns and overcoming resistance to change will require a comprehensive approach that prioritizes transparency, accountability, and stakeholder engagement[17]. Building trust among administrative cadres, fostering a culture of service-oriented governance, and emphasizing the importance of effective and efficient administrative processes are essential steps in instilling confidence in reform efforts. By learning from past experiences, actively involving stakeholders in the reform process, and promoting a shared vision for modernizing administrative practices, it may be possible to

overcome skepticism and drive successful reforms in the Administrative Examination and Approval system.

4. The path of the bureau of administrative examination and approval reform predicament

4.1. Legal protection: Promote local legislation and formulate a list of administrative approvals

The formulation of Regulations on the Organization of Administrative Examination and Approval Bureau can indeed provide a necessary legal framework to support and facilitate the reform of the Administrative Examination and Approval Bureau. Given the challenges associated with modifying top-level legal systems in a timely manner, developing local regulations can offer a practical approach to align with existing laws while enabling smoother implementation of reform measures. To address potential conflicts with existing laws and regulations when transferring administrative approval power to the reformed Administrative Examination and Approval Bureau, seeking authorization from higher legislative bodies can help ensure compliance and legal validity. By adapting reform measures that may initially violate higher-level laws, local authorities can navigate legal constraints and facilitate the smooth progress of administrative reform initiatives. Maintaining a balance between centralization and specialization is crucial for the effective functioning of administrative examination and approval agencies. Rushing to concentrate all approval items without considering the necessary professionalism and technical expertise can lead to coordination challenges and hinder the efficiency and quality of administrative processes. Emphasizing a relatively centralized approach and carefully assessing the integration of functions based on practical considerations can help prevent inefficiencies and deviations from the intended legislative goals of reform. Standardizing the list of administrative examination and approval items and clarifying the scope of relatively centralized examination and approval by the Administrative Examination and Approval Bureau are essential steps in promoting consistency and efficiency in administrative processes [18]. Additionally, prudent transfer of approval items with high professionalism, implementing transitional periods, and separating technical review from administrative approval can enhance the effectiveness and quality of approval processes. It is important to recognize that certain administrative approval matters subject to vertical management may not be suitable for absolute centralization due to their complexity, confidentiality requirements, and implications for national security and economic stability. Careful consideration of the nature of each approval item and its management structure is essential to avoid disruptions in the administrative system and ensure effective governance.

By refining legislation at the local level, such as through the Standing Committee of the provincial People's Congress, and formulating a clear list of administrative examination and approval items tailored to the specific conditions of the region, authorities can address uncertainties regarding centralized examination and approval items and enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of administrative processes. This approach can help streamline administrative procedures, improve decision-making, and promote better governance practices within the Administrative Examination and Approval system.

4.2. Personnel guarantee: improve the professional quality of examination and approval personnel

The staff of the Administrative Examination and Approval Bureau faces a challenge of inadequate professional quality. To facilitate the smooth progress of the Bureau's reform, enhancing the expertise of examination and approval personnel is imperative. This can be achieved by focusing on three key areas. Firstly, refining the appointment process is essential

to boost efficiency and streamline staff. Emphasis should be placed on matching individuals with suitable roles and responsibilities, fostering a high-quality team with diverse expertise. Additionally, raising the hiring standards for examiners and evaluating their political literacy are crucial steps. Secondly, enhancing post-training and rotation programs is vital for equipping personnel with the necessary professional knowledge. Targeted training sessions, including videos, lectures, and expert guidance, should be conducted to aid new staff in adapting swiftly. Technology training should also be integrated to meet the demands of digitalization. Regular assessments post-training can prevent training formalization and ensure competency. Lastly, reinforcing political education among personnel is essential due to the increased power concentration resulting from the Bureau's reform. This measure is crucial to prevent corruption stemming from excessive centralization, promoting ethical awareness through effective political education, robust supervision, and the alignment of thoughts and actions.

4.3. Coordinate docking: promote information sharing and achieve effective docking

4.3.1. Improve information sharing mechanism

The primary solution to address the challenge of departmental coordination involves enhancing the information exchange system using Internet technology. Specifically, the first step is to advance the online approval function, broaden the scope of online approval services, and deliver tailored approval assistance based on distinct industry needs. Secondly, it is essential to further advance the development of government affairs platforms, promptly disseminate approval details via the official website, WeChat, and Weibo, and achieve efficient circulation and comprehensive summarization of approval data by standardizing approval protocols. Lastly, conducting regular consultation meetings facilitates the efficient sharing of approval-related information and progress updates, dismantles information barriers, establishes effective communication channels, breaks down departmental silos, and integrates sections and units. This approach not only enhances compliance with State Council directives and ensures seamless coordination between different levels of administration but also establishes a collaborative resource integration mechanism, laying a robust groundwork for future coordination and integration efforts.

4.3.2. Improve the vertical docking mechanism

Firstly, it is crucial to clarify that administrative examination and approval bureaus operate under the jurisdiction of governments at equivalent levels. Beyond approval processes, functions like finance and personnel management should fall under the governance of corresponding-level governments.

Secondly, given the incomplete implementation of administrative examination and approval Bureau reforms and the absence of such bureaus at various local government levels, it is imperative for these bureaus to engage in comprehensive provincial-level planning. This ensures the establishment of unified standards regarding examination and approval matters, timeframes, criteria, and procedures to prevent redundancies.

Thirdly, where feasible, Administrative examination and approval Bureaus can establish effective communication mechanisms to liaise with superior government bodies and departments at the same level. This proactive approach facilitates timely communication during challenges, preventing prolonged examination and approval processes and enhancing overall efficiency.

4.3.3. Improve the horizontal docking mechanism

In driving the reform of the Administrative Examination and Approval Bureau, there are two key approaches to facilitate its smooth operation. Firstly, governments at the same level can issue directives to internal departments, urging active cooperation and assistance to ensure the

Bureau's effective functioning. Secondly, the Bureau and specialized administrative bodies can establish a seamless coordination mechanism without necessitating the creation of a dedicated department. This is achieved through an information sharing platform that enables efficient coordination. For instance, utilizing the information network established by the government of Weixian County in Hebei Province, the Administrative Examination and Approval Bureau can instantly transmit approval information to specific functional departments. This not only streamlines supervision but also enhances collaboration in the approval process, enabling bidirectional information feedback. Within this specific coordination framework, designated personnel, such as information officers, can oversee and promptly report coordination issues to the relevant superior department. By leveraging effective communication channels for approval information, coordination with specific functional departments at each approval stage can be efficiently managed, thereby enhancing horizontal coordination efficiency.

4.4. Legal supervision: Strengthen internal and external supervision

The success of reform within the Administrative Examination and Approval Bureau hinges on the fundamental value orientation of "separation of audit and management." The clear delineation of responsibilities between the examination and approval department and the supervisory department is pivotal for the smooth operation of the Bureau. To address the issue of ambiguous boundary demarcation between approval and supervision, it is essential to enhance relevant laws and supporting regulations. This includes clearly defining the distinct responsibilities of approval and supervision and outlining specific methods and scopes of responsibility. By establishing such clarity, internal and external oversight mechanisms can be bolstered effectively. This structured approach not only enhances transparency within the Administrative Examination and Approval Bureau but also ensures accountability and adherence to regulatory frameworks. Strengthening oversight mechanisms both internally and externally is crucial for promoting integrity, efficiency, and effectiveness within the administrative examination and approval processes.

4.4.1. Internal oversight

Firstly, administrative examination and approval bureaus at all levels can consider introducing a joint meeting system. This involves setting up internal departments to conduct regular meetings to simultaneously discuss approval matters, share work reports, and engage in mutual supervision. Secondly, it is important to establish a system of accountability. Drawing inspiration from the lifelong responsibility system for judges, a similar framework should be implemented for examination and approval processes to promptly investigate any illegal activities. Thirdly, an internal special supervision body should be established, overseen by a designated individual, to ensure compliance through a combination of irregular spot checks and routine inspections. Lastly, expanding the reach and capabilities of the electronic monitoring system is crucial to oversee the entire process effectively.

4.4.2. External Supervision

The first step is to adhere to the requirements of e-government transparency. This involves promptly disclosing all approval-related information on the official website to enable public oversight. The second step is to enhance the complaint system on the official website. It is essential to promptly address public or corporate feedback and suggestions. Upon verifying the accuracy of complaints and reports, it is crucial to investigate the responsibility of relevant examination and approval staff and provide timely feedback. Encouraging public involvement in supervising the administrative examination and approval bureau helps establish a robust accountability mechanism and ensures effective oversight. Effective supervision not only fosters standardized examination and approval processes but also prompts personnel to adjust their service approach, align with the service-oriented government concept, enhance approval efficiency, better meet public expectations, and effectively combat corruption.

5. Conclusion

The reform of administrative examination and approval bureaus is crucial for advancing our country's reform efforts and directly impacts the effectiveness of building a service-oriented government. However, any systemic reform is bound to face challenges, particularly when it comes to shaking up entrenched interests, as seen in the resistance encountered during the reform of administrative examination and approval bureaus. These pressures from various stakeholders, while presenting obstacles, also drive continuous progress and refinement of the reform process. Operating on the principles of "simplification, standardization, and efficiency," administrative examination and approval bureaus have significantly streamlined processes by dismantling the previous framework and restructuring power dynamics through separating examination and supervision functions. Despite encountering significant challenges in the reform process, it's important to recognize that these issues are not isolated but rooted in deeper causes. While acknowledging the positive impact of the reform, it's crucial to note that the reform of administrative examination and approval bureaus is still in its experimental phase. Leveraging grassroots innovation, systematically analyzing problems identified during pilot programs, and proposing targeted solutions are essential to drive forward the construction of these bureaus effectively. Recognizing that administrative examination and approval bureaus cannot single-handedly resolve all issues within the current system, continuous adjustments, optimization, and addressing challenges revealed during pilot phases are necessary to ensure the stable progression of the reform. By accumulating valuable experiences and disseminating successful practices nationwide, the reform efforts can be more effectively advanced and contribute to broader systemic improvements.

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