

The Evolution of Government's Public Service Purchase Policy: A Historical Institutionalism Framework of Analysis

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Abstract: Public service innovation is the eternal theme of government management. Scientifically recognizing the change process, evolution logic and dynamic mechanism of the government's public service purchase policy is not only an important support for grasping the policy direction and optimizing the policy design, but also a realistic demand for promoting the quality and efficiency of public services and accelerating the modernization of the national governance system and governance capacity. Based on the analytical perspective of historical institutionalism, the government's purchase of public services in China has experienced three important stages: local exploration, standardized development, and deepening reform. Its historical evolution has been profoundly influenced by situational factors, institutional factors, path dependence, and key nodes. The demand for government function transformation and social governance mechanism innovation, as well as the need for service object needs change and public service supply model innovation, are the driving forces behind policy change. Looking ahead, the government's purchase of public services should focus on standardizing and adjusting the setting of guiding catalogs, improving the needs assessment of service purchase, perfecting the implementation process of service purchase, and strengthening the process supervision and evaluation of results, so as to promote the high-quality development of the government's purchase of public services.

Keywords: Government's Public Service Purchase; Historical Institutionalism; Policy Change.

1. Question Raising and Literature Review

The government's purchase of public services, as a major innovation in the field of public service provision, not only represents a brand-new concept and means of governance, but also is regarded as a key initiative to promote the modernization of the social governance system and governance capacity. The core of this model is that the government hands over part of the public service projects originally provided directly by the government to qualified social organizations, enterprises or individuals through contract commissioning, public bidding and other means. Because of its significant advantages in enhancing the efficiency of public service provision, optimizing service quality, and expanding the coverage to meet the diversified needs of the public, the government's purchase of public services has become the main way to perform the function of public service provision in many countries. According to the statistics of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), in 2015, the U.S. government's expenditure on the purchase of public services accounted for about ten percent of the year's gross domestic product and one-quarter of the total government expenditure[1], and the U.K. government's expenditure on the purchase of public services amounted to as much as 220 billion pounds, which accounted for almost thirty percent of the total expenditure[2]. China's government purchase of public service practice began at the end of the last century, initially focused on some economically developed areas and specific areas, such as urban sanitation, landscaping and so on. After entering the 21st century, with the deepening of the transformation of government functions and the improvement of the public

finance system, the scope of government-purchased services has expanded rapidly, gradually covering a number of livelihood areas such as education, culture, science and technology, sports, social security and environmental protection. Especially in recent years, in the face of the aging trend of the population, health and hygiene needs to upgrade, employment pressure continues to increase, public security challenges, and other social issues, the government purchases services in the elderly services, medical and health services, employment services, and psychological counseling, legal aid, and other professional services in the more frequent and in-depth application, and effectively alleviate the problem of insufficient supply of public services, the quality of the problem is not high. However, it must be clearly recognized that the institutional framework and implementation mechanism in the field of government-purchased public services in China are still at a critical stage of continuous exploration and optimization, and the policy design and implementation must be continuously adjusted to adapt to and satisfy the evolving social situation and public demand. The report of the 20th Party Congress points out that it is necessary to improve the basic public service system, raise the level of public services, and enhance their balance and accessibility, which is not only the Party's profound response to the current major social contradictions, but also a brand-new requirement for the construction of the public service system in the new era[3]. Therefore, paying attention to the issue of government purchase of public services is not only a reflection of closely matching the pulse of the times and actively responding to social problems, but also a necessary way to promote the development of China's public service system in the direction of higher quality, more efficient, fairer and more sustainable.

When administration is far-reaching, theory comes first. The academic research on government purchasing of public services gathered momentum in the 1970s and 1980s. At that time, a wave of administrative reforms was launched worldwide with the ultimate goal of finding a governance model that enhances the administrative efficiency of governments, optimizes the quality of public services, and reduces administrative costs[4]. Against this background, the government's purchase of public services has become a new and compelling governance strategy in the process of administrative reform, attracting the attention of many scholars, with academic results springing up and showing a booming trend. Overall, the relevant discussion mainly unfolds from the following eight aspects: First, the connotation of attribute studies, that the government purchase of public services is the introduction of the market competition mechanism into the field of public services, to break the government monopoly pattern of behavior, specifically refers to the government finance to provide funds, through the designated procedures for public service matters to all kinds of qualified social service institutions to produce in order to perform their own functions of the series of activities[5]; Second, theoretical basis studies, that the rise and development of government purchase of public services is the crystallization of a variety of theories, including public choice theory, polycentric governance theory, principal-agent theory, and service-oriented government theory, etc.[6]; Thirdly, it is the research on the scope of the boundary, which believes that the primary premise of the quality control of the government's purchase of public services lies in the ability to accurately and clearly delineate the boundary of the purchase of services, and that although the guiding ideology and implementation standards of the scope of the limitations of the various parties have different opinions, the ruler system constructed on the basis of the nature of the service, the cost-effectiveness, the operability and other factors has been widely recognized and actively adopted[7]; The fourth is institutional model studies, which believes that the choice of institutional model for government purchase of public services has multiple constraints, and that the applicable situations, governance consequences, and management costs of the project system, the unitary system, and the mixed system all show very different differences[8]; Fifth, the operation mechanism studies, which believes that the government's purchase of public services is an innovative attempt and useful exploration of the reform in the field of public services, and the specific operation can be summarized as the determination of demand and budgeting, the declaration and approval of the project, the choice of the purchase method and its implementation, the signing and fulfillment of the contract, and the acceptance of the service and payment of the funds[9]; Sixth, risk management studies, that the government's purchase of public services does not necessarily enhance the efficiency and quality of public service provision, and may erode the democratic governance of society, and even weaken the government's responsibility to provide, it is necessary to deeply understand the existence of risks, strengthen the ability to identify the risks, and improve the risk prevention system, so as to ensure that the government's purchase of public services to truly realize its expected policy benefits[10]. Seventh is the quality assurance studies, which believes that the quality of government-purchased public services is affected by multiple factors, including whether the relationship of responsibility between

the main body is clear, whether the competition between the suppliers is sufficient, and whether the supervision and management of the process and the results are in place[11]; Eight, the realistic dilemmas studies, which believes that the government's purchase of public services still needs to be perfected in terms of policies and regulations, support systems, technical applications and operational processes[12]. Established studies on the one hand help us to deepen our understanding of the government's purchase of public services, and on the other hand, provide valuable theoretical guidance and experience for the development of the government's purchase of public services. However, the evolution history and law summary of government purchase of public services at the practical level are still insufficient.

In view of the current urgent need of society to build an efficient public service supply system and the limitations of established research in the field of government purchase of public services, this paper proposes the following research questions: First, what is the history of the change of the government's policy of purchasing public services? Second, what is the evolutionary logic of government purchase of public service policy? Third, what is the development direction of government purchasing public service policy? Through the implementation of this longitudinal policy panoramic scanning, we can not only retrace the historical lineage of policy development, distill valuable lessons learned, and provide historical mirrors for the current and future optimization of the government's policy of purchasing public services, moreover, we can effectively promote the standardization and systematic development of the government's policy of purchasing public services on the basis of a profound grasp of the law of policy evolution.

2. Historical Institutionalism Analytical Framework

Historical institutionalism is an important school of neo-institutionalist political science that emerged in the mid-1980s, and its formal birth was announced by Sillen and Steinhardt's 1992 publication *Structured Politics: Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Politics*[13]. Historical institutionalism views institutions as a complex system rooted in the organizational structure of the polity or the political economy, including constitutional rules, formal procedures, explicit norms, operational rules within the bureaucracy, practices regulating relations between banks and enterprises, and cultural traditions governing individual behavioral norms, etc[14]. It places the system at the center of the theoretical framework, with special emphasis on the core role of institutions in influencing political behavior, shaping public policy and promoting institutional change[15]. At the same time, it skillfully integrates key elements such as structure, history and actors, focusing on the sequence and interaction of political variables, the background and influence of major events, and the inertia and inheritance of existing institutions in the process of institutional change. It attempt to explore the evolutionary mechanism and deep-seated motives of institutional development, so as to reveal the inherent logic and universal laws of institutional change[16].

The government's purchase of public service policy, as a kind of historical accumulation and the real needs of the ephemeral system, historical institutionalism for its evolutionary process of inductive analysis provides a very suitable and rich explanatory power of the research

perspective. This paper is based on the core essence of the historical institutionalism analysis paradigm, that is, from the perspective of the long historical period, comprehensively and systematically examining the key events in the process of policy development, effectively grasping the key role and far-reaching impact of deep structure, political system and micro foundation in the process of policy change, then successfully constructing a comprehensive analytical framework of government purchasing public service policy - "macro-scenarios- meso-systems- micro-structure", as shown in Figure 1. The macro-scenarios dimension focuses on analyzing how contextual factors such as politics, economy, culture and society, and institutional factors such as concepts and interests jointly shape and influence the formation trajectory and evolution path of the policy; the meso-systems dimension pays more attention to the inertial force of path dependence and the turning effect of key nodes, analyzing how policies can maintain relative stability while undergoing profound changes; the micro-structure dimension focuses on the interaction between actors, emphasizing that

the interaction mode of multiple subjects directly affects and profoundly shapes the actual operation and direction of policy development, and demonstrating the dynamics that cannot be ignored in policy change. Through the application of historical institutionalism, this study not only overcomes the "Coleman's Dilemma" of coordinating macro and micro in social science research in terms of methodology, but also realizes an all-around and multi-angle perspective on the deep logic and complex mechanism of the government's purchasing of public service policy change with the help of a multi-level composite analytical framework in terms of content. Policy change is undoubtedly a very complex process, this paper focuses on the change of government purchase of public service policy, aims to provide valuable references and inspiration for future policy formulation and reform practice through detailed combing of its development trajectory, in-depth analysis of the evolution logic, and meticulous thinking of the optimization direction, so as to promote the high-quality development of the government purchase of public service field.

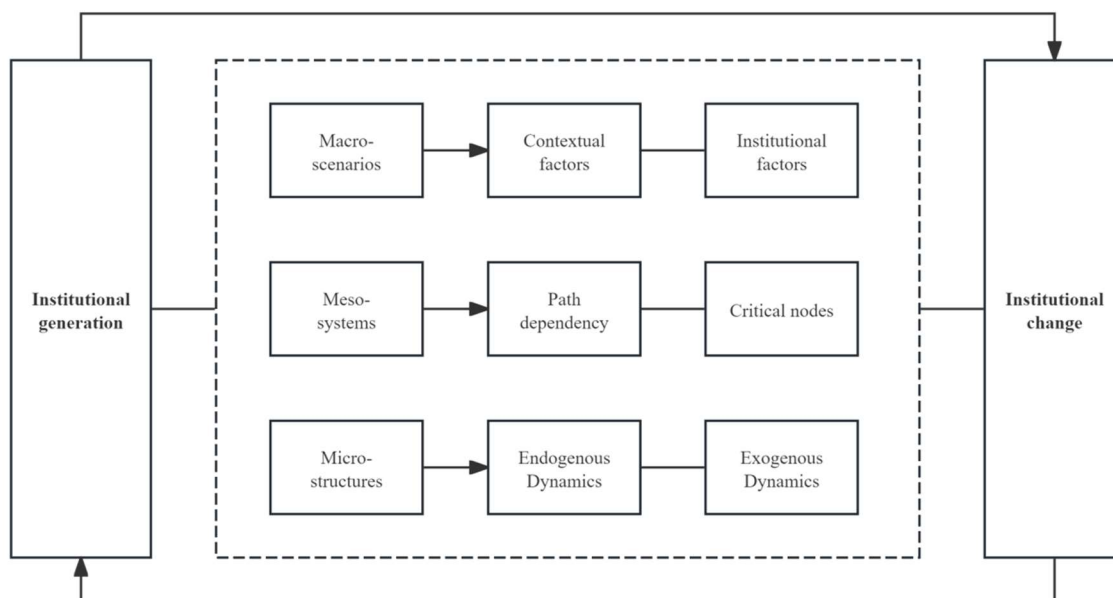


Fig. 1 Analytical framework for government purchase of public services

3. The History of Changes in Government Policies on the Purchase of Public Services

In the early 1990s, the local governments of some economically developed cities in China took the lead in exploring the mode of government purchase of public services. By systematically combing the relevant policy documents and clarifying the "key nodes" in the course of change, the change of government purchase of public services can be divided into three phases: local exploration, standardized development, and deepening reform.

3.1. Local Exploration: 1994-2012

The Chinese government's practice of purchasing public services began in the 1990s, and it's a brilliant result of the local government's positive response to the changes of the times, courageous breakthrough of the traditional framework, and continuous optimization of the way of performing its duties in the historical torrent of the profound transformation of the economic system from a planned economy to a market

economy. In 1994, Shenzhen Luohu District took the lead in the field of environmental health to purchase services to try, and achieved remarkable results. Compared with the traditional service model, to professional sanitation companies to buy services not only significantly reduce the financial expenditure in the field of sanitation, but also make the quality of sanitation operations to achieve a qualitative leap. In 1996, Shanghai Pudong New Area also embarked on the road of innovation in public service provision, which was directly responsible for the operation of the government's Luoshan Civic Hall, the contract entrusted to the YMCA of Shanghai in the form of a significant increase in the efficiency of the management of the Hall, but also opened up a brand-new chapter in the cooperation between the government and society in the provision of public services. Since then, the reform wave of the marketization of public service provision has rapidly swept across the country, with Beijing, Tianjin, Zhejiang, Guangdong, Hunan, Jiangsu, Sichuan, Chongqing and other places following suit, and the form of government purchasing of public services has become increasingly rich, and the fields are constantly being broadened. In 2005, the

Poverty Alleviation Office of the State Council and others successfully implemented the “Pilot Project on Cooperation between Non-Governmental Organizations and the Government in Village-level Poverty Alleviation Planning” by means of public bidding, marking the formal entry of the central departments into the practice of exploration, and further promoting the development of the Government's purchase of public services.

During this period, the purchase of public services by the government in China is characterized by the following features: First, local independent exploration is extensive. Based on their own actual situation and people's needs, local governments have actively drawn on advanced experience at home and abroad to explore and implement a series of innovative initiatives to purchase public services, laying a solid foundation for the standardized development of the government's purchase of public services. Second, the scope of purchase is relatively limited. The government's purchase of public services mainly focuses on certain key areas or specific projects, such as education, health, pension and other basic services in the field of people's livelihood, the purchase of the field needs to be further expanded. Third, the system has yet to be strengthened. Although local governments have accumulated valuable experience in practice, the institutionalization of government purchase of public services is still lagging behind, and problems such as the low degree of standardization of social organizations and the lack of government regulatory responsibility are prevalent, leading to greater flexibility and uncertainty at the operational level, which affects the improvement of service quality and efficiency.

3.2. Period of Standardized Development: 2013-2017

After the 18th National Congress of the Party, the central level has significantly increased its attention and support to the purchase of public services by the government, and formally incorporated them into the core issues of national policies. In September 2013, China's first official document for the government to purchase public services, the “Guiding Opinions on the Government's Purchase of Services from Social Forces” was publicly released, which not only systematically defines the elements and requirements of the government's purchase of public services from social forces, but also provides a clear directional guideline and operational path for the promotion of its implementation across the country, and also marks that China's government has entered a new stage of standardized development of the government's purchase of public services. Under the strong drive of the central policy, local governments at all levels have responded positively and have adjusted and optimized the existing implementation plan, forming a good situation of up and down linkage and synergistic promotion. In December 2014, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Civil Affairs and the State Administration for Industry and Commerce jointly issued the “Measures for the Administration of Government Purchased Services (Interim)”, which provides detailed regulations on the qualification of the main body of the service contractor, the scope of the content of the purchased services, the implementation procedures and fund management, the supervision and management of the purchasing process, and the assessment and evaluation of the performance of the services, providing unprecedented comprehensive guidance and detailed specification for the

implementation of the government's purchase of public services. However, with the deepening of practice, in some areas, in the name of government purchase of public services, in fact, the improper behavior of illegal financing and debt, in order to curb the spread of chaos, in May 2017, the Ministry of Finance issued the Notice on Resolutely Stopping Illegal and Unlawful Financing by Localities in the Name of Government Purchase of Services, which further clarifies the prohibited areas of government purchase of services, and reaffirms the system of budget first.

During this period, China's government purchase of public services presents the following characteristics: First, the promotion mode of government purchase of public services has realized a fundamental leap. From the past local independent exploration, pilot first, gradually changed to the central and local up and down linkage, synergistic promotion, for the government to buy public services to lay a solid foundation for the full spread and in-depth development. Secondly, the importance of government purchase of public services has become more and more significant. Through the purchase of services, the government effectively integrates social resources and promotes the diversified supply and quality improvement of public services, and the government's purchase of public services has also become an important hand in promoting the transformation of government functions, optimizing resource allocation, and enhancing people's well-being. Thirdly, the policy system of government purchase of public services has been perfected day by day. The State Council and relevant departments have successively issued a series of policy documents and guidance opinions, clarifying the scope of purchase, standardizing the operation process, strengthening the regulatory mechanism, and gradually building up a comprehensive, scientific and standardized policy framework, which has significantly accelerated the process of standardization of the government's purchase of public services.

3.3. Period of Deepening Reform: 2018 to Present

In February 2018, the Third Plenary Session of the 19th CPC Central Committee was held in Beijing, which considered and adopted the Decision of the CPC Central Committee on Deepening the Reform of Party and State Institutions, proposing that the diversification of the main bodies of supplying basic public services and the diversification of the modes of supplying them should be actively promoted and that the introduction of a competition mechanism in the field of non-basic public services should be encouraged, so as to improve the efficiency and quality of services through market operation and to promote a comprehensive upgrade in the field of public service provision. The Fourth Plenary Session of the 19th CPC Central Committee further emphasized the need to actively innovate the public service supply mechanism, provide strong support for the participation of social forces, and build a clearer and more efficient public service supply system, so as to ensure that the results of the reform benefit all people more equitably and extensively. In order to thoroughly implement the above strategic plan, in January 2020, the Ministry of Finance revised and promulgated the Measures for the Administration of Government Purchased Services, which comprehensively and systematically standardizes the subject, content, implementation process, regulatory mechanism and legal responsibility of government purchased public services,

providing the most comprehensive guiding framework for government purchased public services so far. In order to more clearly regulate and promote the healthy and sustainable development of the practice of government purchase of public services, in December 2020, the Ministry of Finance formulated and issued the Guiding Catalog of Government Purchase of Services at the Central Government Level, which clearly answered the key question of “what to buy” through exhaustive enumeration and set out a clearer and more comprehensive guide to the process of government purchasing of public services for all levels of government departments in the process of purchasing public services. This not only strengthens the transparency and operability of the government's purchase of public services, but also lays a solid foundation for the sustainable development of the government's purchase of public services, and leads the government's purchase of public services in China in the direction of more specialization and refinement.

During this period, the purchase of public services by the Government of China has been characterized by the following features: First, the scope and form of public services purchased by the Government have been widely expanded. The wide scope of purchase covers almost every aspect of social life, such as public security, education, employment, social security, health, ecological protection, environmental management, science and technology, culture, sports, etc. The form also presents diversified characteristics, with public bidding, contract outsourcing, franchising, government subsidies, voluntary recruitment and other modes of co-existing to flexibly satisfy the specific needs of different fields and different projects. Secondly, the development of public services purchased by the government has also promoted the development and growth of social organizations. In this process, social organizations, as important participants and undertakers, have not only gained more development opportunities and resource support, but also improved their professional capacity and service level, and the vitality and potential of social organizations have been effectively stimulated. Thirdly, the policy system of government purchase of public services has become more and more perfect. With the continuous introduction and revision of relevant laws and regulations, guidelines and implementation rules, the policy framework for government purchase of public services in China has become more sound, providing a clear direction, clear norms and strong support for practice, but on the whole, it is still facing the challenges of insufficient supply of systems, inadequate regulatory mechanisms, and the degree of standardization needs to be improved, so the institutionalization of the government's purchase of public services still has a long way to go.

4. The Evolutionary Logic of Government Policies for the Purchase of Public Services

Historical institutionalism focuses on how institutions evolve in the course of history and how they influence current and future policy choices and development. In understanding the evolutionary logic of the government's public service purchasing policy, we need to pay attention to its macro-scenarios, meso-systems and micro-structures.

4.1. Deep Structure: Macro-contextual Analysis of the Change of Government Policy on Public Service Purchasing

Historical institutionalism believes that the macro-contextual change runs through the whole process of institutional change, and institutional change is often only the stage presentation and fragmentary unfolding of the macro-contextual change. Environmental change is not only the prerequisite for institutional change, but also the deep-rooted incentive for institutional change[17]. Situational factors bring about the pressure and demand for institutional change, which can be understood as political, social, economic and other environments, and institutional factors influence the choice and direction of institutional change, which can be understood as concepts, consensus and interests and other environments. With the in-depth development of China's socialist democracy and the steady advancement of political system reform, pluralistic subjects of action are more and more eager to participate in the sharing of power and the co-governance of society. This trend has not only changed the power relationship between the government and society, but also prompted fundamental changes in the pattern of resource distribution, laying a solid political and social foundation for the introduction and implementation of the government's policy of purchasing public services. The degree of economic development is also an important factor influencing the change of government policies on public service purchasing. The significant increase in the degree of economic development, on the one hand, the government has more resources and capacity to optimize the mode of public service provision, on the other hand, it also leads to a more diversified and personalized demand for public services, which leads to a significant enhancement of the government's effectiveness orientation and further promotes the development of the government's policy of purchasing public services. The profound change in government philosophy and the formation of a broad consensus have also played a key role in driving policy change. As the concept of “governance” has been widely recognized and fully emphasized at the theoretical and practical levels, the government has gradually completed the transition from an all-powerful to a service-oriented role, and its behavioral patterns in providing public services have also changed significantly. The government began to pay more attention to the participation and collaboration of multiple subjects, and actively seek opportunities for cooperation with social forces. This change not only catalyzed the birth of the government's public service purchasing policy, but also had a profound impact on its subsequent development trajectory. The impact of the game of interests on the government's purchase of public service policy change can not be ignored. In the practice of government purchase of services, the government and social organizations as the core actors, each showing different behavioral logic and interests. The government, as the main purchasing body, focuses its core concerns on the quality, quantity and social benefits of services, and pursues the effective use of financial resources and optimization of public service provision. Social organizations, as the undertaking subject, expect to seek the expansion of social influence and the realization of their own value by participating in the government's purchase of services, and pursue the acquisition of project funds and the maximization of profits. Promoting the government's purchase of public services in the direction of standardization,

standardization, professionalization and institutionalization is not only an inherent requirement to ensure the effectiveness of the policy, but also an inevitable choice to improve the quality of public services and promote the harmonious development of society.

4.2. Fractured Equilibrium: A Meso-institutional Analysis of Policy Change in Government Purchase of Public Services

Equilibrium is the long-term option of change and rupture is the concentrated manifestation of change; the former centers on path dependence and emphasizes the gradualness of institutional change, while the latter centers on key nodes and emphasizes the abruptness of institutional change[18].

4.2.1. Institutional Equilibrium: Path Dependence Leads to Institutional Survival

Path dependence refers to a self-reinforcing mechanism of institutions, i.e., once an institution is selected, institutional inertia develops and all relevant participants adjust their strategies to fit the current pattern[19]. In this process, path dependence shows a dual orientation: on the one hand, a good path can stimulate a positive feedback loop, prompting the system to continuously optimize and upgrade, and enter a virtuous circle; on the other hand, the initial system design flaws will trigger a negative feedback mechanism in the subsequent development, locking the system in an inefficient or ineffective state that is difficult to get rid of. On the other hand, the defective design of the initial system will also trigger a negative feedback mechanism in the subsequent development, which will “lock” the system into an inefficient or ineffective state. China's government to buy public services in the development process, a profound reflection of the path of dependence on this characteristic. Its trajectory of change presents a distinctive gradual character, ensuring that the system can remain relatively stable in the transition process, for all parties to adapt and adjust to provide a buffer space. Starting from the initial local exploration, through the baptism of standardized development, until the current deepening of the reform into a new stage, the government purchase of services system has undergone thirty years of gradual and orderly progress, continue to mature and improve. In this process, the government purchase of public services has always been adhering to the concept of governance, effectively promoting the development of cooperative relations between the government and social forces, and promoting the optimization and upgrading of social governance structure. At the same time, with the continuous updating of social values and the increasing participation of the public, the policy of government purchase of public services has gained wider recognition and support, further promoting its in-depth development. On the basis of maintaining overall stability, the central government has continued to improve the relevant policy framework, and the local level has also actively practiced and summarized its experience, which together have contributed to the significant improvement in the effectiveness of government purchased services, forming a series of positive feedback effects. However, the negative effects of path dependence should not be ignored. For example, some regional governments in the purchase of public services, despite the nominal competition, but in the selection of the main contractor, often more inclined to internal designation or directional commissioning, as well as in the process of the government's purchase of public

services, the relationship between the main body is often presented as a clearly unequal state and so on.

4.2.2. Institutional Rupture: Key Nodes Driving Institutional Change

A “critical node” can be understood as an important period in the course of policy change, which either gives birth to a major decision or leads to a major turnaround, and is a concept that combines the dual attributes of time and event. Historical institutionalism attaches particular importance to those major events that can profoundly affect the future direction, in its view, these events often have the power to disrupt the existing equilibrium, forming a striking and distinctive institutional rupture, and opening up the way to a new institutional construction[20]. Recalling the historical lineage sorted out in the previous article, the government's purchase of services as a systematic innovation in the course of its development, at least three iconic “key nodes” can be identified. In 1994, shenzhen luohu district took the lead in the purchase of service innovation step, is the government purchase of public service policy changes in the course of the first key node. In the field of environmental sanitation, Luohu District pioneered the breakthrough of the traditional relationship between the government and the direct employment of sanitation workers model, instead of adopting a new mechanism, the government first encouraged and guided the original sanitation workers to set up a sanitation company, and then to these new sanitation companies to buy services, the results of this attempt to be a great success, the effect of cleaning is greatly improved. Since then, the government's purchase of public services began to gradually spread. The second key point in the history of government purchase of public services policy change is the convening of the 18th Party Congress, which explicitly proposed to accelerate the transformation of government functions, emphasizing the need to focus on the provision of better quality public services, and innovative service supply model. Since then, the government's purchase of public services is no longer just a local innovation attempt, but has become a key strategy to promote the transformation of government functions at the national level and strengthen the function of “social management and public service”, and the government's purchase of public services has formally stepped into a new stage of standardized development. The convening of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) has once again injected a new impetus and direction for the deepening development and continuous upgrading of the government's purchase of public services, and has become the third key node in the course of its transformation. The General Assembly clearly pointed out that the main contradiction in our society has undergone a profound transformation, and this assertion not only reveals that social development has entered a new stage, but also reflects that social governance is facing new challenges. Against this background, the purchase of public services by the Government has been given higher expectations and higher requirements, and the process of institutionalization, professionalization and standardization of the purchase of public services by the Government has been fully accelerated.

4.3. Power Mechanism: Microstructure Analysis of the Policy Change of Government Purchase of Public Services

Historical institutionalism holds that institutional change

occurs and is accomplished under the joint influence of multiple factors, whether endogenously or exogenously driven, and is the result of the integration, competition and compounding of multiple factors[21].

4.3.1. Endogenous Drive: The Requirements of Government Function Change and Social Governance Mechanism Innovation

Government public procurement of services is not only an important achievement and embodiment of the transformation of government functions, but also an important attempt and exploration of the innovation and breakthrough of social governance mechanism. Since the reform and opening up, China's economic system has realized a magnificent transformation from a planned economy to a market economy, and this historic leap has not only reshaped the country's economic outlook, but also stimulated unprecedented development vitality. However, while the reform of the economic system is progressing at a high speed, the innovation of the government's governance model is relatively lagging behind, failing to synchronize with the profound changes in the economic system. With the growing maturity and deepening of the market economic system, its inherent requirements and operating logic prompt us to re-examine and adjust the government governance model. In the past, the government as a single subject, the overall administrative management model, in the face of increasingly complex and diversified social governance environment, gradually revealed its efficiency bottleneck and response lag. In order to adapt to the development requirements of the new era, the government has begun to re-examine its own role and actively explore new mechanisms for social governance. In this context, the government purchase of public services as an innovative means of governance came into being, the model of the market mechanism into the field of public service provision, the original part of the public services provided directly by the government, through the contract entrusted to the qualified social forces through open bidding, etc., and the government based on the quantity and quality of services, the service provider to pay the corresponding costs. This transformation not only effectively reduces the financial burden of the government, but also promotes the overall improvement of service quality. More profoundly, the implementation of government purchase of public services also promotes the optimization and upgrading of government functions and the virtuous circle of social governance mechanism. In this process, the government is no longer the producer of public services, but has become the planner, regulator and evaluator of public services, focusing more on the core functions of strategic planning, policy guidance and macro-control, while social organizations are able to give full play to their own strengths under the guidance and support of the government to provide society with better quality services, forming a new pattern of collaborative governance between the government and the society and the building of a new pattern of sharing.

4.3.2. Exogenous Impetus: The Need for Changes in the Demand of Service Recipients and Innovation in the Mode of Public Service Provision

The exogenous impetus for the Government's purchase of public services stems mainly from the increasing diversification and refinement of the needs of service recipients, as well as the urgent need for a more efficient and professional mode of public service provision. With the rapid social and economic development and the steady

improvement of people's living standards, the public's demand for public services is increasingly characterized by diversification and refinement. Whether in the fields of education, medical care, pension or culture and entertainment, people expect to enjoy higher quality and more targeted public services. At the same time, the public's sense of participation in public services is also growing. They are no longer satisfied with being passive recipients of services, but want to be more deeply involved in the decision-making, monitoring and evaluation process of public services. In the face of such changes in demand, the traditional mode of direct provision of public services by the government has become more and more inadequate, and the government has begun to actively explore and practice a new mode of service provision. The government's purchase of public services is precisely an innovative initiative that came into being in this context. It successfully breaks the traditional framework of single government supply, activates the huge potential and creativity of social organizations through the introduction of market competition mechanism, and promotes the profound transformation and upgrading of the public service supply mode. The core advantage of this model lies in the ability to make full use of the expertise and innovative capacity of social organizations to bring the public a better and more efficient public service experience. Social organizations, as an important social force independent of the government system, usually have a sharper sense of the market, more professional service skills and a more flexible response mechanism, and are able to quickly capture the changes in public demand, adjust the content and mode of service in a timely manner, and ensure the relevance and effectiveness of the service. In addition, they are also good at introducing advanced management concepts and technological means to continuously improve service efficiency and quality through technological empowerment. This public demand-oriented, technology innovation-driven service model is undoubtedly more in line with the requirements of the times, and more capable of winning public recognition and trust.

5. Future Prospects of the Government's Public Service Purchase Policy

As a core strategy for optimizing resource allocation and enhancing the efficiency and quality of public services, the strategic position of government purchase of public services has become increasingly prominent. Reviewing the history of China's government purchase of public service policy, it can be clearly seen that this policy system has undergone a profound transformation from fragmented and crude to gradually systematized and systematic. Looking ahead, China's government purchase of public services system is expected to achieve continuous improvement in the following aspects, in order to build a more refined, efficient and sustainable public service supply system.

5.1. Standardizing and Adjusting Guiding Catalog Settings

The reasonableness and scientificity of the guiding directory settings are directly related to the standardization and effectiveness of purchasing practices. Currently, the purchase catalog settings in some regions have problems such as fuzzy boundaries and poor operability, leading to the phenomena of excessive purchasing and waste of resources

that can easily occur in actual operation. The future should further standardize and adjust the guiding catalog settings. Firstly, it is necessary to clarify the specific boundaries of the government's purchase of public services. Local governments should strictly follow the policy guidance issued by state departments and standardize the preparation of guiding catalogs for government-purchased services in their regions. In the compilation process, the strategy of enumeration-based and descriptive methods should be used, along with the necessary negative lists, to accurately delineate the boundaries of the scope of purchased public services. Secondly, it is necessary to refine the category system of public services purchased by the government. On the basis of clear purchase content, the service classification should be further refined to build a hierarchical and clear-cut service catalog system to ensure that key items in the field of basic public services are given priority for purchase and key protection. Finally, a regular mechanism for adjusting the guiding catalogue should be established. In the face of the ever-changing market environment and the changing needs of the public, it is necessary to maintain the flexibility and adaptability of the guiding catalogue. Therefore, a scientific and complete catalog adjustment mechanism should be established to ensure that the purchasing content can be adjusted in a timely manner in response to market changes. In terms of specific operations, the guiding catalog should be reviewed and revised on a regular basis, taking into account such factors as the actual situation of economic and social development, the latest changes in public demand, and the maturity of social forces and the market system.

5.2. Sound Needs Assessment for Service Purchase

Needs assessment, as an indispensable and crucial precursor before the government initiates the process of purchasing public services, is deeply related to and affects the efficiency and fairness of public resource allocation, aiming to comprehensively examine the core issues of "whether there is a need to purchase, whether the purchase is effective, and how to implement it efficiently". At present, when some regions make decisions on the purchase of public services, the lack or insufficiency of needs assessment often leads to insufficient scientific decision-making. In the future, there is an urgent need to further improve the needs assessment mechanism for service purchasing to support more accurate and efficient purchasing decisions. First, diversified information collection channels should be constructed. Public opinions and demand information should be collected through questionnaires, symposiums, hearings and other means, while scientific analysis and forecasting should be carried out by combining big data analysis, expert consultation and other means, so as to ensure the comprehensiveness and accuracy of the assessment results. Second, a multi-dimensional assessment index system should be established. The system should comprehensively cover multiple key aspects of public service purchasing, including but not limited to: necessity analysis to clarify whether the service project truly meets the public demand and the requirements of social development; feasibility analysis to assess the realistic conditions and potential obstacles of project implementation through in-depth research and scientific proof; and cost-benefit analysis to clarify whether the service project is worthwhile to promote. Finally, the way of government purchase of public services should be scientifically planned. Based on the nature

of the service, market size, supply capacity and other factors, the government should flexibly choose a variety of purchasing methods, such as direct purchase, entrusted management, franchising, etc., in order to realize the effective supply of public services in an optimal way, and help ultimately realize the organic unity of the economy, efficiency and effectiveness of the purchase results.

5.3. Improving the Implementation Process of Service Purchase

A well-developed implementation process for the purchase of services is the key to ensuring the smooth implementation and efficient operation of the government's policy of purchasing public services. In the future, we need to further improve the implementation process of service purchase to ensure the standardization and effectiveness of the purchase process. First of all, to clarify the responsibility and authority of all parties. The government should clarify its own dominant position and supervisory responsibilities in the purchase process, while giving social organizations the corresponding right to provide services and autonomy. Both sides should be clear in the contract of their respective scope of responsibility and obligations, to ensure that the responsibility is clear, clear division of labor. Secondly, the design and implementation of the purchase process should be optimized. Government purchase of public services, although a wide variety, but on the whole should follow a set of standardized purchase procedures, the process should be comprehensive coverage of needs assessment, planning, budgeting, program evaluation, purchase implementation, contract fulfillment, service supervision, performance evaluation and follow-up management and other aspects. Finally, the construction of a risk prevention system should be strengthened. In the process of purchasing public services, risks are everywhere, we must always be vigilant and strengthen risk prevention and response capabilities. Specifically, we need to establish a sound risk identification and assessment mechanism to capture potential risks in a timely manner; formulate effective risk response measures to ensure that risks can be quickly responded to and properly dealt with; and, at the same time, strengthen the risk awareness training of project management personnel to enhance their ability to deal with risks, so as to ensure the smooth operation of the public service purchasing program and provide the public with higher quality and more efficient public services. The program will provide the public with better and more efficient public services.

5.4. Strengthening Process Supervision and Result Evaluation

Process supervision and evaluation of results are important safeguards for the Government's purchase of public services. Only by strengthening supervision and evaluation of results can we ensure that the quality and effectiveness of the purchased services meet the expected goals. Therefore, in the future, we need to further strengthen the process supervision and evaluation of results to ensure the standardization, professionalization and efficiency of the purchase of services. First of all, it is necessary to build and improve an all-round and multi-level professionalized process supervision mechanism. This requires us to actively expand external supervision channels on the basis of strengthened internal supervision, form internal and external linkage supervision synergy, and extend supervision to the whole chain of

purchasing public services, including but not limited to reasonable audit of budgeting, scientific selection of purchasing methods, strict checking of qualification of off-takers, dynamic tracking of contract fulfillment, as well as transparency and fairness in the final settlement of the purchase, so as to ensure that each link follows the norms and operates efficiently. Secondly, it is necessary to establish a sound, scientifically rigorous and operationally strong performance evaluation mechanism. This mechanism should clarify the main body of the assessment and ensure the independence and professionalism of the assessment work; and design a scientific and reasonable assessment index system that covers hard indicators such as the quantity and quality of services, and also takes into account soft indicators such as public satisfaction and social benefits; at the same time, we should pay attention to the application and feedback of the evaluation results as an important basis for subsequent service improvement, policy adjustment and purchasing decisions, forming a virtuous cycle of “evaluation for improvement, improvement for excellence”, and promoting the government's purchase of public services in the direction of standardization, professionalism and efficiency. Finally, information disclosure and public participation should be strengthened. Timely and accurately publicize to the community the information on key aspects of the purchase of public services, such as project information, budgetary arrangements, procurement process, off-taker selection, contract implementation and performance evaluation results, so as to let the power run under the sun, accept extensive supervision by all sectors of the community, and form a good situation of co-rule between the government and the community to jointly promote the healthy development of the government's purchase of public services.

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