

# Development of Local Foreign Affairs Management Departments in the Context of Administrative System Reform --Taking the Foreign Affairs Office of Shaanxi Province as an Example

Chengkang Wang

Foreign Affairs College, Beijing 100091, China.

---

**Abstract:** Since the reform and opening up, China has continuously pushed forward the administrative system reform, adapted to the national conditions and the requirements of the times, and achieved fruitful results. Generally speaking, the successive administrative system reforms have focused on the government and the adjustment of the dynamic relationship between government-market-society. Due to the special characteristics of local foreign affairs departments in the administrative system, the successive reforms have provided less guidance to them, and related research is also relatively lacking. However, from a practical point of view, local foreign affairs offices have long followed the pace of administrative system reform and carried out a series of adjustments and optimizations. As an important element of administrative system reform, the functional transformation of local foreign affairs offices has been continuously promoted along with institutional reform. This research, which is mainly based on talks and supplemented by document comparisons, aims to study the development results and experiences of the Foreign Affairs Office of Shaanxi Province in the context of administrative system reform, and tries to provide a case study for the administrative system reform of local foreign affairs departments.

**Keywords:** Administrative System Reform; Government Function Transformation; Foreign Affairs Management; Local Foreign Affairs Office

---

## 1. Administrative System Reform

### 1.1 Overview of the history of administrative system reform in China

Since the reform and opening up, China has carried out eight administrative system reforms in order to adapt to the trends and requirements of economic and social development and to promote socialist modernization. The first four reforms focused on decentralization and devolution of power, mainly adjusting the government's economic functions and eliminating institutional and procedural factors that constrained economic development.

The first reform, which began in 1982, focused on institutions and personnel, laying the organizational and personnel foundation for shifting the focus of the Party and the country from "class struggle" to "socialist modernization"; the 1988 reform focused on the restructuring of economic power, giving enterprises autonomy to break through the "class struggle". The 1988 reforms focused on the restructuring of economic power, giving enterprises autonomy to break away from the planned economic system and the "all-powerful government" mentality. In the two administrative reforms that began in 1993 and 1998, respectively, China's administrative reforms were adapted to the socialist market economic system, and the separation of government and enterprises was realized to a great extent through the decentralization of economic power and the abolition of industrial economic departments.

It is worth noting that in the 1988 reform, the idea of "transforming government functions is the key to institutional reform" was first proposed, and in the 1993 reform, the idea of integrating party and government institutions was first put forward. These two ideas have continued to this day and have grown in importance, influencing the reform of the administrative system at all levels and in all

sectors, and playing a particularly important guiding role in the development of the Shaanxi Foreign Affairs Office in this study.

The latter four reforms focused on the development and fulfillment of the government's due responsibilities and functions, and began to develop the government's social management and public service functions in addition to its service economy functions. The 2003 reforms improved the government's market regulation functions, while the government's emphasis on the fulfillment of its social management and public service functions gradually increased after the outbreak of SARS; the 2008 reforms, which focused on the social management and public service departments, The 2008 reform focused on social management and public service sectors, emphasized the concept of building a service-oriented government, and put forward the idea of reforming the large ministry system.

In 2013, the reform further prioritized the transformation of government functions, and continued to promote the construction of a service-oriented government and reform of the major ministry system with clearer objectives, and formally summarized the idea of "release, management, and service" reform in the State Council's 2015 TV and telephone conference on the work of simplification, decentralization, and combination of function transformation. In 2018, China's administrative system reform entered a new era of promoting the modernization of the national governance system and governance capacity, and systematically solved the problems of responsibility gaps, fragmentation, lack of power, intersection and overlap through the adjustment of institutions and functions. In addition, this reform focuses on depth and quality; in addition to developing its governance system, China is also focusing on modernizing the way it governs, and on optimizing its functions in addition to transforming them.

It is worth noting that in the reform that began in 2003, China began to focus on the reform of the administrative approval system, and after the 18th CPC National Congress, the 2013 reform emphasized the simplification and decentralization of government, and continued to promote the reform of the administrative approval system, while putting forward ideas such as strengthening the supervision of the incident after the event, in addition to the three-list system and so on, which were put forward during the two sessions of the 2015 session, marking the transformation of government functions into a new stage. These changes, as well as the 2018 institutional restructuring, have had a profound impact on the development of the Foreign Affairs Office of Shaanxi Province.

In February 2023, the Second Plenary Session of the 20th Party Central Committee passed the Party and State Institutional Reform Program, and in March of the same year, the First Session of the 14th National People's Congress voted to adopt the decision on the State Council's institutional reform program, and at that moment, China entered the ninth administrative system reform. The particularity of the background of the new round of reform lies in the fact that the current situation of the century's unprecedented changes is accelerating the evolution of China's development into a period of strategic opportunities and risks and challenges coexist, and the increase in the number of uncertain and unpredictable factors, which also puts forward more new requirements for the new round of reform.

## **1.2 Characteristics and trends of administrative system reform in China**

Throughout the course of China's administrative system reform, the following features and general trends can be summarized.

First of all, adapting to the socialist market economic system and economic development environment is always the essential requirement, and promoting economic development is always the most important purpose of administrative system reform. Successive reforms of the administrative system have been carried out within the framework of the government-market-society relationship, adjusting the division of governmental roles through institutional reforms and functional transformations, and grasping the scope of governmental authority and the boundaries of responsibility.

At the same time, the integration of party and government institutions is an issue that has been under constant consideration in the reform, and is also a trend in the current and future reform efforts. The idea of separating but integrating party and government institutions has been put forward since the administrative system reform in 1982, and has been deepened and implemented since 1993, and this principle as well as the idea has been practiced continuously since then.

In terms of the overall direction of work, the central position of the transformation of government functions has become more and more prominent, with decentralization, management and services being promoted separately and combined with each other as the main direction of reform to realize the transformation of functions. In terms of decentralization, in order to cope with the greater demand brought about by the opening up of the economy and modernization, the institutional facilitation of administrative approval and other functions should also be the direction of continuous improvement in the future. In terms of combining decentralization with

management, from the object of management to the way of management, all will be aspects that will be continuously adjusted and optimized in the reform process. The construction of a service-oriented government, on the other hand, is the core of the transformation of government functions. On the basis of a clear overall construction goal, government agencies at all levels and in all sectors will continue to optimize their services according to their own sectoral characteristics and by giving full play to their sectoral features.

In terms of the direction of future macro changes, transforming "institutional advantages into governance effectiveness" will be an important proposition. 2018 enters a new era, proposing to promote the modernization of the national governance system and governance capacity, emphasizing the direction of governance-oriented reform. To promote the modernization of the governance system and governance capacity, we should be based on the real needs, pay attention to and mobilize multiple governance subjects, coordinate the "relationship" and "knowledge" of all levels, functions, public and private sectors, and use modern information technology and other means to enhance governance capacity. This means that China's administrative reform will not only focus on functional transformation, but also on the optimization of responsibilities, and promote the departments and their resources from dispersion to integration, and from parts to the whole.

## **2. Shaanxi Province**

In recent years, the Foreign Affairs Office of Shaanxi Province has experienced two important institutional adjustments. After the institutional adjustments, the status of the Foreign Affairs Office has been improved, and the Party's leadership of foreign affairs work has also been strengthened in terms of institutional settings.

### **2.1 First Adjustment: From an Organization Directly Under the Government to a Component Department of the Government**

In the process of institutional reform, the State Council approved two Functional Transformation and Institutional Reform Programs of the People's Government of Shaanxi Province in 2000 and 2014 respectively. Accordingly, the Shaanxi Provincial Government officially issued two "Shaanxi Provincial People's Government Foreign Affairs Office (Provincial Overseas Chinese Affairs Office) Functional Configuration of Internal Organizations and Staffing Regulations".

In 2000, the Provisions clearly stated that "the Foreign Affairs Office of the Provincial People's Government (Provincial Overseas Chinese Affairs Office) is the directly subordinate administrative organization of the provincial government in charge of the province's foreign affairs and overseas Chinese affairs" <sup>[1]</sup>. In the 2014 Provisions, the relevant expression is "the establishment of the Provincial Foreign Affairs Office, as a constituent department of the provincial government" <sup>[2]</sup>, marking the provincial Foreign Affairs Office formally transformed from an organization directly under the government into a government department, increasing the authority of the department and the importance of the overall work.

In fact, as early as 2007, the General Office of the Provincial Government had already issued a notice on the adjustment of the Provincial Foreign Affairs Office from an organization directly under the government to a constituent department <sup>[3]</sup>. The Regulations issued in 2014 formalized it and clearly elaborated the functions of the Provincial Foreign Affairs Office as a constituent department of the government, canceled the management responsibilities for Hong Kong, Macao and Chinese-funded institutions in Shaanxi Province and the certification of overseas Chinese-funded and overseas Chinese-funded enterprises, and transferred the responsibilities for the approval of the settlement of overseas Chinese in Shaanxi Province from the Provincial Public Security Department to the Provincial Foreign Affairs Office. The reform raised the status and importance of foreign affairs work in government work, while continuing to change functions, reduce the Foreign Affairs Office in the economic aspects of the management and approval functions, and give fuller play to the Foreign Affairs Office as a government department of foreign affairs management functions.

### **2.2 Second adjustment: listing the Office of the Foreign Affairs Working Committee of the CPC Shaanxi Provincial Committee**

On February 28, 2018, the Decision of the CPC Central Committee on Deepening the Reform of Party and State Institutions, adopted by the Third Plenary Session of the 19th CPC Central Committee, proposed that "the relevant Party institutions can be set up in a coordinated manner with other departments that have similar functions and are closely linked, and be merged and set up or

co-located, so as to integrate and optimize their strengths and resources, and to give play to their comprehensive benefits "[4].

Under the guidance of this line of thinking, Shaanxi Province, in accordance with the unified deployment of the provincial party committee to form the CPC Shaanxi Provincial Committee Foreign Affairs Working Committee Office, the province's foreign affairs work is assigned to this provincial institution, while retaining the brand of the Foreign Affairs Office of the provincial government. This institutional reform puts the integration of party and government departments into local foreign affairs management departments. At present, only eight provincial and municipal foreign affairs offices have been transferred to the provincial party committees in the national institutional reform, and Shaanxi Province, as one of them, has taken the lead in starting the exploration and accumulation of experience in practice.

On the one hand, the integration of party and government organizations has given the corresponding organizations the impetus to change their functions in terms of mechanism and power. In the process of transferring the Foreign Affairs Office of Shaanxi Province to the provincial party committee, it has realized the change of its own positioning and the transformation of its functions, and at the same time put forward stricter requirements for its own work, bursting out with new vitality. On the other hand, party and government integration has strengthened the Party's leadership in local foreign affairs management. The advantage of realizing the direct unified leadership of the Party through institutional reform instead of incorporating the Party's leadership into the work links through the design of procedures is that it avoids the possible addition of procedures and links, ensures the simplification and decentralization of government, and moreover realizes the goal of preventing overlapping of institutions, duplication of functions, and overlapping of work through the consolidation of institutions, and realizes the integration of strengths and resources and the realization of comprehensive benefits.

### **3. Functional Transformation and Optimization of the Work of Shaanxi Foreign Affairs Office**

Since the institutional reform, the Provincial Foreign Affairs Office has assumed the role of centralized management, leadership and supervision of the province's foreign affairs work, and has gained more autonomy in carrying out diplomatic and foreign affairs activities and serving the country's overall diplomacy. In terms of optimization of functions and duties, the Provincial Foreign Affairs Office's grasp of its own functions and duties as well as the corresponding transparent work have shown the characteristics of clarity and refinement. In terms of concrete actions of functional transformation, the Foreign Affairs Office has grasped the spirit of the central documents and explored independently to realize decentralization, combination of administration and optimization of services, and has formed some experiences with local characteristics.

#### **3.1 Positioning and Task Transformation**

In the process of the provincial foreign affairs office participating in the administrative system reform, the most notable change is shown in its grasp of its own positioning and characters. Traditionally, the work of local foreign affairs offices is mainly to undertake the tasks of the central government, to undertake, co-organize and serve foreign affairs activities, and to cooperate with various departments to carry out foreign affairs work. In recent years, with the increase in the importance of foreign affairs work and the institutional reforms coordinated by the Party and the government, the powers and functions of the foreign affairs offices have also changed significantly. At present, the provincial foreign affairs office still retains its functions as a government agency, and retains its traditional role as a participant and behind-the-scenes servicer of foreign affairs activities, but it has gradually assumed the function of coordinating and guiding the foreign affairs work of the whole province, and has gained the power and initiative to host foreign affairs activities and develop parallel diplomacy on its own.

##### **3.1.1 Positioning change: from participation and assistance to coordination and leadership**

In terms of functions, the Shaanxi Foreign Affairs Portal has added the expression "coordinating and arranging the foreign affairs activities of provincial leaders"[5]; changed from "responsible for the training of the province's foreign affairs cadres and foreign-related personnel"[2] to "responsible for guiding the province's foreign affairs cadres and foreign-related personnel"[3]. Training of the province's foreign affairs cadres and foreign-related personnel" [5], it can be seen that the Foreign Affairs Office has begun to do

more to coordinate and guide, rather than just docking and guarantee.

Fundamentally, the essence of this shift is the change of the Foreign Affairs Office's positioning of itself. The positioning of the role of the Foreign Affairs Office of Shaanxi Province as the leader of the province's foreign affairs work is mainly reflected in two aspects, namely, the coordination and harmonization of the province's foreign affairs information resources and the leadership and supervision of the province's foreign affairs management business functions. In terms of information resources coordination, in recent years, the Foreign Affairs Office is responsible for summarizing, organizing and transmitting economic and trade as well as other foreign affairs information for the reference of provincial leaders and various departments, and for studying the opening-up and cooperation with the outside world. It is worth noting that in recent years, the Provincial Foreign Affairs Office has established a liaison mechanism for the resources of friendly cities, set up a relevant website, formed a platform for summarizing the information on the resources of friendly cities, and the cities and relevant departments and bureaus as member units for information resource sharing.

In addition, the Provincial Foreign Affairs Office holds annual meetings with the directors of local municipal foreign affairs offices, etc., aiming at promoting information and resource sharing among municipalities and realizing the development of the coordinated functions of the Provincial Foreign Affairs Office. The provincial foreign affairs office also focuses on the integrated use of resources of cities and regions in the process of foreign affairs reception, developing routes for group visits and organizing large-scale activities, giving full play to the characteristics of cities and regions, and inviting the relevant departments and bureaus to collaborate in the promotion of foreign affairs activities. The initiatives taken by the Foreign Affairs Office of Shaanxi Province in resource integration are worth learning from as a rare practical experience in other places.

In terms of coordinated guidance on operations and functions, since the institutional reform of the Foreign Affairs Office, relying on the working mechanism of the Foreign Affairs Working Committee of the Provincial Party Committee, it has established a mechanism for researching, semi-annually supervising, and province-wide supervising the province's foreign affairs, realizing its role of leading and supervising the province's foreign affairs staff in terms of their operations and functions.<sup>2023</sup> In January, in accordance with the Circular of the General Office of the State Council on the Comprehensive Implementation of the Management of the List of Administrative Licensing Matters, the Provincial Foreign Affairs Office also prepared and issued the List of Foreign-Related Administrative License Matters in Shaanxi Province<sup>[6]</sup> and made it public on the web portal. This list summarizes and organizes the dispersed foreign-related administrative permit approval matters of provincial departments in the List of Administrative Permit Matters of Shaanxi Province issued by Shaanxi Province for the reference of the personnel of the Foreign Affairs Management Office of each department in the province and for the supervision of the society. This system enhances the transparency and accuracy of administrative approval information disclosure, while providing institutional support for the orderly opening up to the outside world.

### **3.1.2 Grasp the main tasks: serving the overall national diplomacy and local social development**

At the macro level, in addition to focusing on the benefits of economic development, the reform of the administrative system also pays more and more attention to the social benefits and the comprehensive interests of the country. The special nature of provincial foreign affairs departments means that the task of serving the overall diplomatic needs of the country will occupy a greater proportion in the process of its future functional transformation. In recent years, the provincial foreign affairs office has noticed that in the process of designing foreign affairs activities and carrying out foreign cooperation, municipalities, departments, and civil society entities are prone to pay attention only to economic and social benefits, and pay less attention to serving the country's overall diplomacy. In order to strengthen the awareness of cities and municipalities to serve the country's overall diplomacy in the process of foreign exchange, the Shaanxi Foreign Affairs Office is studying the establishment of a comprehensive index system for open development, which includes the number of foreign students, the introduction of foreign capital, investment and exports as the index assessment content. This work also demonstrates the increasing leadership and supervisory functions of the provincial foreign affairs office.

As for the participation and leadership of the provincial foreign affairs office in diplomatic and foreign affairs activities, after years of practice, the Shaanxi Foreign Affairs Office and its subordinate institution, the Provincial Friendship Association, have accumulated rich experience in the field of urban diplomacy; the goal of constructing a highland for inland reform and opening-up provides impetus for the Shaanxi Foreign Affairs Office to carry out openness to the outside world; and the reform of the

administrative system has further empowered the office with the right to take initiative in carrying out urban diplomacy and the space for it to play its role.

In recent years, in addition to doing a good job in serving the overall national diplomacy and local social and economic development of the "two services", the provincial foreign affairs office to promote the construction of the Belt and Road, and promote the construction of a community of human destiny as a major goal. With the help of three major events, namely the Silk Road Expo, Eurasian Economic Forum and Agricultural Trade Fair, the Foreign Affairs Office has created a platform for foreign exchange in Shaanxi Province. At the level of civil diplomacy, the provincial Foreign Affairs Office helps promote the Silk Road International Art Festival, Silk Road International Tourism and Travel Association, Silk Road International Film Festival and other ancillary activities to strengthen humanistic exchanges with countries along the "Belt and Road". In addition, the provincial Foreign Affairs Office is planning to hold a seminar on civil diplomacy in the second half of 2023, in an attempt to integrate knowledge resources and departmental functions in various fields of diplomacy, and to form a synergy to study the development of civil diplomacy programs together.

In the aforementioned activities, the Provincial Foreign Affairs Office coordinated the planning and invited the participation of various departments to strengthen the guidance of foreign affairs work. In addition, the activities promoted by the Foreign Affairs Office include the Provincial Foreign Affairs Parlor, organizing video conferences on RCEP synergistic development of regional cooperation, and so on, to promote exchanges and communications among international enterprises. Utilizing the resources of Friendship Cities, the Foreign Affairs Office organizes local government cooperation forums to develop regional industrial cooperation with foreign countries, as well as promotes the Belt and Road and the China-Europa-Bahn Train projects, designs the routes of delegations, and coordinates the reception of resources in the province, so as to enhance domestic and foreign interoperability.

After the institutional reform, the provincial friendship association, as an institution directly under the Foreign Affairs Office, is responsible for coordinating the work of civil diplomacy of all civil diplomacy subjects in the province, from government departments to enterprises, colleges and universities, social organizations, etc., serving as a bridge for public diplomacy, as well as carrying out the work of concluding city diplomacy as a main body of the city of friendship, etc. Some regional offices have also targeted the development of regional industrial cooperation. Some of the regional offices also target the countries in their areas of responsibility, participate in local international organizations and international conferences, and carry out exchanges in the areas of economy and trade, humanities, education and so on. In addition, it also undertakes tasks assigned by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of the People's Republic of China to conduct foreign affairs receptions and organize international activities and projects. Generally speaking, both the provincial friendship association and the provincial foreign affairs office assume the roles of coordinating the province's diplomatic and foreign affairs resources, proactively participating in and carrying out diplomatic and foreign affairs activities, and serving and participating in the country's foreign affairs activities, and the combination of the three effectively realizes the goal of "two services".

### **3.2 Clarification of Functions and Refinement of Responsibilities**

In recent years, the Foreign Affairs Office of Shaanxi Province has implemented a list system and compiled a list of powers and responsibilities. At present, the internal functions of Shaanxi Foreign Affairs Office and the public announcement of its external functions are all characterized by clarification. For example, in the description of functions announced on the current Shaanxi Foreign Affairs Portal, the expression "responsible for matters related to going abroad on official business"<sup>[2]</sup> in the 2014 version of the Provisions on the Main Duties, Internal Organizations and Staffing of the Foreign Affairs Office of the People's Government of Shaanxi Province has been changed to "examining and approving matters related to temporary departure for official business for personnel at the departmental bureau level and below, and examining and approving matters related to temporary departure for official business for personnel at the departmental bureau level and below. temporary departure on official business and related matters and handle the relevant formalities" <sup>[5]</sup>, "to undertake matters relating to the invitation of foreign personnel to visit" <sup>[2]</sup> amended to "to undertake matters relating to the invitation of foreign personnel to visit the specific reporting and approval" <sup>[5]</sup>, clear The objects and contents of the corresponding functions are clarified.

For the public, the Provincial Foreign Affairs Office, in accordance with the requirements of "standardized by law, comprehensive

and accurate, open and transparent, and convenient for the people", has formulated and released a list of public service matters and a service guide in the portal website. The list and guide contain information on the contents of public service matters and their corresponding acceptance units, consultation methods, processing time limit, processing basis, application materials, processing procedures and costs, etc., which greatly facilitates access by clerks and the public.

The Foreign Affairs Office of Shaanxi Province has also demonstrated refinement characteristics in the process of adjusting the approval authority. In 2020, the central government formulated a series of regulations on foreign affairs management of central enterprises, and adjusted the approval and management authority for the personnel of provincial enterprises to go abroad. Shaanxi Province formulated the foreign affairs management regulations for provincial enterprises in Shaanxi Province in accordance with the relevant provisions of the central government. The most notable change in the new regulations is that a large part of the authority originally required to be reported to the provincial government for approval has been decentralized to the Foreign Affairs Office, and at present, in addition to the trio of the enterprise chairman, general manager and party secretary whose trips need to be reported to the provincial government, all the enterprise personnel's trips can be directly approved by the Foreign Affairs Office. This adjustment presents a refined feature in the identification of the approval object and the decentralization of the approver's authority, thus providing greater convenience for enterprises to go out.

As a matter of fact, as early as 2016, Shaanxi Foreign Affairs Office had already communicated closely with the provincial SASAC and took the lead in the initial attempt to decentralize the approval authority and liberalize the approval policy, stipulating that in addition to the visits of members of the leading team of the enterprise that need to be approved by the provincial government, the visits of all other personnel can be directly approved by the Foreign Affairs Office. The official regulations in 2020 institutionalized the reform results, while further empowering the Foreign Affairs Office and also further liberalizing the restrictions on the personnel who can be directly approved by the Foreign Affairs Office. Shaanxi Foreign Affairs Office has shown autonomy, innovation and foresight in the optimization of this approval system. The efforts made by the Foreign Affairs Office to adapt to the trend of reform and explore reforms by exercising its subjective initiative in this process are worthy of reference and study.

### **3.3 Combination of Decentralization and Indicatorized Putting in Place and Management**

In terms of decentralization to facilitate enterprises, the provincial foreign affairs office has made many innovative policy adjustments in recent years. In order to adapt to the current reality of frequent foreign exchanges and increased demand for enterprise visits, the Foreign Affairs Office has implemented on-demand visits and supported multiple approvals in a year. In addition, the foreign affairs management regulations for enterprises introduced in 2020 broke through the three-month time limit for temporary travel on official business and allowed permanent approval of enterprises, which provides institutional support for expanding opening up to the outside world.

In terms of the combination of release and management, since 2020, as the central government has introduced policies on strengthening the management of affairs during and after the event, the Shaanxi Foreign Affairs Office has immediately grasped the relevant spirit to carry out reforms, and has gradually formed a foreign affairs regulatory experience with relatively local characteristics. In 2020, the provincial Foreign Affairs Office set up a series of assessment standards for the completion of the tasks of enterprise visits and the implementation of after-action supervision, focusing on the work of the enterprise personnel during their stay abroad after the visit, the results of the implementation of the visit plan and the required actions, and the follow-up after the visit, and evaluating the results by scoring, and following them up with an assessment frequency of every six months. The Foreign Affairs Office will link the scoring results to the issuance of targets for the number of corporate visits in the following year, and reduce the targets for those whose scores are deducted. This initiative was developed to avoid wasting targets and resources, and to ensure that visits are practical and effective, providing a boost to Shaanxi Province's socio-economic development.

This monitoring system will be formally implemented in 2023, and in the future, the Foreign Affairs Office will test the effectiveness of the system and the scientificity of the assessment criteria, and continuously improve the corresponding monitoring system under the guidance of this monitoring concept. This initiative in the simplification of government and decentralization at the

same time to change the concept of supervision, to promote the management of the incident after the event, in the focus on the prevention of the prior, risk-oriented basis to achieve the change from "strict entry and leniency" to "leniency and strict control".

### **3.4 Promoting service optimization in various aspects**

The service functions of the Foreign Affairs Office are more prominently reflected in the consular protection work and administrative approval. In the consular protection work, the Foreign Affairs Office consular office is mainly responsible for the protection of the rights and interests of overseas citizens and compatriots, to assist in reviewing and coordinating the handling of foreign-related cases, policy and interpretation of laws and regulations, and at the same time to coordinate the relevant docking work of foreign consulates in Shaanxi.

The special nature of the administrative approval of the foreign affairs management department is that, to a large extent, it has intersection with the consular protection work, the administrative approval not only focuses on the control of qualifications and indicators, but also focuses on the control of the risk of personnel visits. In short, the provincial foreign affairs office will be the approval work as the political security risk control of the front work, do a good job of the first risk assessment and prevention, in addition to the current foreign affairs office functions in the original "understand and supervise the province's foreign-related activities of the personnel abroad on official business" and then added "and put forward the corresponding recommendations and measures"<sup>[5]</sup> specific expressions, clear foreign affairs office in the risk analysis and prevention, services, government and business personnel visit the corresponding responsibilities.

Optimization of services, fundamentally from the system, procedures and ways to optimize the convenience of service for the people and people's satisfaction. In the relevant aspects, the Foreign Affairs Office opened a green channel, basically realized the online through the office, and allows online and offline synchronization, so that the people to run less, and improve the efficiency of government work. In addition, the Foreign Affairs Office has also optimized its services from some details, such as passport processing and visit approval can be accelerated according to the actual needs of the process. Overall, the provincial foreign affairs office in the foreign affairs service using Internet technology and procedural modifications, increasing the flexibility of the system, so as to better serve the needs of the public and enterprises.

Optimization of services relies not only on the modernization of means and tools, but also on the professionalization of business personnel in the operation process. In recent years, it has become a mechanism for the Foreign Affairs Office to hold regular annual business training and policy briefing to follow up on the optimization of functions and operations in real time. In addition, the Foreign Affairs Office real-time updates and publishes instructive materials such as the handbook for specialized staff and the manual for visa processing to provide guidance for practical operation. This initiative ensures the implementation of policy and procedure optimization in actual operation, and ensures that the service optimization is real and effective.

## **4. Development Dilemma of Shaanxi Foreign Affairs Office**

The achievements of the Foreign Affairs Office of Shaanxi Province in the areas of functional transformation and "release of management and service" are notable, but in the process of independent exploration, due to the lack of existing experience, there are still some degree of systemic constraints as well as operational difficulties, which limit the Office's further function of expanding openness to the outside world.

### **4.1 Maturity of program design needs to be improved**

With the rapid achievements of city diplomacy work, in recent years, with the work of Friendship Cities and city diplomacy, some countries have started to set up consulates in Shaanxi, and accordingly some program designs have exposed unscientific and immature nature. For example, at present, on the online approval procedure of the foreign consulates in Shaanxi Province, the consular personnel identity documents need to be processed by the consulate to take note of the embassy seal, while the embassy seal filing office requires the presentation of identity documents, the existence of this contradiction has not been resolved, and it has become a factor that delays the work of the consulate landing and affects the development of diplomatic relations.

### **4.2 Indicators and Processes Not Adapted to Modern Needs**

With the increase of China's total economic development and the need to promote globalization, it is a general trend to raise the



level of opening up to the outside world. With frequent exchanges and increased affairs with foreign countries, the demand for resident or representative offices in foreign countries has increased significantly in recent years from many enterprises to government departments and universities. However, the reality of the same environment is that, in view of the uncertainty of the international situation, China mainly pursues a risk-oriented foreign affairs management ideas. As a result, the demand for visiting subjects is increasing, while the approval procedure for international exchange is showing a tendency to become stricter.

In this context, in order to activate the opening up of the economy, the provincial Foreign Affairs Office has implemented the management of on-demand visits for enterprises, with no limit on the number of visitors, time and destination, and generally speaking, there is more room for liberalization and decentralization. As for the visits of party and government personnel, the Foreign Affairs Office has always been based on the principle of strictness and tightness, and has implemented the distribution management method for approval, with increasingly stringent standards and a gradually higher threshold.

In fact, the party and government personnel visits and enterprise foreign cooperation between there are many cross, the current construction of free trade zones, the construction of the international industrial chain also requires the party and government personnel with the relevant foreign responsible person for direct communication and discussion, and the party and government personnel exchanges with foreign countries is also a provincial and municipal opening up of a content of the work of the high-level leaders to communicate with each other for the cooperation and the consensus reached often play a multiplier effect. Therefore, the approval of the party and government personnel to visit the strict, in fact, to a certain extent, also restricts the opening up of the economy and the development of urban diplomacy.

In addition to the international relations and the situation of the irresistible factors, there are two aspects of human factors constraints on the relaxation of the approval. The most basic factor is the design of the total number of indicators. At present, the Foreign Affairs Office adopts an allocation management approach to approving visits by party and government personnel, and the total number of visits available for allocation still adopts the standards set by the government many years ago. However, the rate of growth of the total economy in recent years has led to an increase in the total demand for visits. Under the constraints of the total number of missions, the approval of foreign affairs offices has had to raise the threshold of entry by means of standardized heat-proofing, which has put a certain amount of pressure on the work of foreign affairs offices.

In terms of procedure and process design, there is a similar inability to adapt to new demands. Although the OFT has promoted many related facilitation initiatives such as enterprise resident approval and one-year multiple approvals since 2020, the optimization of these systems still belongs to the exploratory stage, with no previous experience to follow and a lack of clear theoretical and documented guidance, and thus potential risks, regulatory difficulties and governance challenges may constantly arise in the process.

Another immediate problem is that, with the increasingly close ties between countries, the scope of the subject's external interactions is no longer limited to a single country, but has become a new need and trend for exchanges between multiple countries within the same region. In other words, multilateralism has been reflected in the city's foreign exchanges as well as the need for enterprises and departments to visit. However, at present, China has not yet formed the approval and visa stamping procedures for the movement of enterprises or departmental personnel between multiple countries in the region as well as multiple round trips, which directly restricts the establishment of regional representative offices and the development of foreign exchanges of multiple subjects.

### **4.3 Specialized construction of foreign-related management needs to be improved**

In the process of carrying out foreign-related management work of the Foreign Affairs Office, especially foreign-related consular protection work, the staff has experienced the difficulty in dealing with practical problems, and the lack of relevant laws and regulations, as well as the difficulty in applying and interpreting the corresponding laws. Due to the limitation of authority and resources, the Foreign Affairs Office is also unable to deal with relatively complicated consular cases in a timely manner. In the process of information dissemination, local foreign affairs offices are also restricted by their authority and can only report to the Department of Consular Affairs, but are unable to get sufficient intellectual support and legal assistance.

This situation has hindered the resolution of foreign-related cases and disputes over citizens' rights and interests, and has caused problems for both the personnel of the foreign affairs offices and the citizens and expatriates abroad. In fact, the rule of law in foreign-related management not only relies on consular protection and related laws and regulations on consular protection, but also

involves the qualification examination of enterprises and employees, the implementation of the rule of law in exit and entry management, as well as the coordination of international law, civil and even criminal procedural law and other legal disciplines, in addition to relying on the professionalism of the staff of the office.

The core spirit of the administrative system reform is to promote the organic unity of the Party's leadership, the rule of law and the people's ownership. In foreign-related management, especially in consular protection, it is important to further study and promote the legal basis of some difficult issues, and the professional ability and legal literacy of the consular protection staff should be excellent in order to cope with various situations. At the same time, provincial, municipal and national consular protection agencies, diplomatic agencies and other organizations should form a joint office or consulting mechanism to jointly seek optimal solutions to difficult foreign-related cases.

#### **4.4 Mechanical obstacles to foreign cooperation**

In the process of promoting foreign economic and trade cooperation and humanistic exchanges independently carried out by the provincial foreign affairs office, in addition to the international situation, political relations and other macro factors, a major obstacle lies in the differences in the functions of inter-country institutions. For example, due to the fragmentation and specialization of Japan and South Korea's international exchange offices, in the promotion of cooperation and exchanges between Japan and South Korea, the Foreign Affairs Office often encounters a situation where the diplomatic objectives do not correspond to the functions of the other office, which makes it impossible to promote economic and trade cooperation in the plan.

In order to solve this problem, the Foreign Affairs Office tries to implant China's economic development ideas and publicity of foreign cooperation projects in various humanistic exchange activities, and tries to mobilize the interest of international friends to take the initiative to carry out economic and trade cooperation. However, the solution to the institutional obstacles should also rely on institutional adjustments. At present, the Foreign Affairs Office is unable to carry out economic and trade cooperation in consultation with the corresponding humanities exchange agencies, but the Foreign Affairs Office has the possibility of promoting cooperation between specialized economic and trade departments, and mobilizing the domestic counterparts to cooperate with the corresponding foreign departments is a possible breakthrough in solving the institutional obstacles to cooperation.

### **5. Future Development Direction and Suggestions**

In view of the experiences and dilemmas of Shaanxi Foreign Affairs Office in the process of development, this research summarizes the following future trends and suggestions.

#### **5.1 Conceptual change from passive to active, from relationship to knowledge coordination**

In the past, the Foreign Affairs Office has been more of a behind-the-scenes participant and facilitator of state-sponsored activities, providing support and services for the foreign affairs work of various departments. In these jobs, the essence of the work of the Foreign Affairs Office is the docking of the relationship between the main body of domestic diplomacy and foreign affairs and the main body of foreign countries, playing the role of a bridge and intermediary.

Nowadays, foreign affairs have penetrated into all aspects of society, from the Ministry of Commerce and even the Ministry of Justice and other government departments, to enterprises, universities and various civil organizations and groups, have established their own foreign affairs function agencies to carry out foreign affairs work. However, unequal information and poor communication often bring difficulties and even conflicts in the process of inter-departmental cooperation and synergistic development. In addition, the foreign affairs personnel, relations, information and functional roles of various departments, levels and fields have a lot of room for development and utilization as the province's foreign affairs resources.

Facing the future, the functional transformation of local foreign affairs offices is fundamentally a change of concept and role orientation. As an organization responsible for the province's foreign affairs management of the party and government coordination, the provincial foreign affairs office should not only better undertake the domestic and international relations of the higher-ups, but should also take the initiative for the departments and private foreign affairs subjects to matchmaking, and carry out exchanges. Further, the Foreign Affairs Office should not only do a good job in the traditional sense of domestic and foreign relations docking

work, but should also play the function of management under the port, and do a good job in the province's resources and information coordination and leadership, to realize the change of functions.

In terms of specific work, on the one hand, the advantages of the Foreign Affairs Office in obtaining foreign affairs information should be fully utilized to summarize and establish an information-sharing platform to provide information, resources and intellectual support for the development and design of foreign affairs activities of each subject. On the other hand, it is a successful experience for the Foreign Affairs Office of Shaanxi Province to promote the integration of party and government organizations. The Foreign Affairs Office after institutional reform, as a department of party-government coordination, should have the right to play a guiding or even commanding role over the foreign affairs work of various departments and bureaus in the province, such as the Development and Reform Commission and the Bureau of Commerce. The Foreign Affairs Office should have the right to coordinate the foreign affairs work of all departments and subjects, macroscopically grasp the foreign affairs work carried out by all departments, and supervise its implementation. At the same time, it should also take the initiative to build bridges between departments to form a province-wide joint effort to improve the level of opening up to the outside world in all aspects. In addition, the Foreign Affairs Office should have the right to coordinate and invite other departments to participate in the docking as needed in the process of carrying out foreign exchanges and promoting cooperation, so as to better achieve the international cooperation of the counterparts.

Not only that, serving the country's overall diplomacy not only relies on the enhancement of the capacity of individual provinces and municipalities, but should also unite the resources and information of different provinces, so as to take what is needed and realize the comprehensive benefits. In terms of resource and information integration of friendly cities, the Foreign Affairs Office of Shaanxi Province has been in the forefront in providing information summarization for the province. In the future, on the basis of promoting relevant work within the province, the Foreign Affairs Office of each province and city should take the lead in promoting the exchange of foreign affairs information and sharing of resources across provinces and cities. Provide the support of information network for effective and favorable exploration of friendship city relationship. With the advancement of this work, the foreign affairs offices of provinces and cities will form a synergy among themselves to jointly serve the overall layout of great power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics.

## **5.2 Continuing to promote standard-setting, maturation of program design and professionalization of business level and talent team**

The total demand for opening up to the outside world in the new era is not what it used to be. In order to better serve the economic development and social needs, in the further reform, the number of restrictions and approval thresholds of going abroad on official business should be relaxed to a certain extent. In the long run, we should be pragmatic, establish a real-time indicator update mechanism oriented to the needs of economic development and foreign exchange, and carry out strict approval and preparatory work oriented to risk control, so as to combine the two and take into account the security and development in the process of opening up to the outside world.

In addition, to meet the new functions of the Foreign Affairs Office and optimize its services, more stringent requirements have been put forward for the maturity of the procedures and professionalism of the service personnel in the Foreign Affairs Office's business processing. Along with the macro transformation of functional roles, the micro and even detailed issues of technology utilization and process design should be further dealt with. On the one hand, eliminate the contradictions and inefficiencies in the work interface and process to ensure the smoothness of business processing. On the other hand, for the reception of foreign guests, meeting design, event preparation and other work, fixed procedures and process samples can be studied and summarized, thus providing support for future external exchanges of greater number and higher frequency.

Finally, the foreign affairs office should further improve the construction of the personnel team. At present, the local foreign affairs office pays the most attention to the language ability of the clerks, and there are certain professional restrictions in the recruitment requirements. However, the problem of limitation by professional name has appeared in the current recruitment of talents. In terms of future personnel, the Foreign Affairs Office should consider taking the type and ability of talents as the guide, relaxing the restriction of professional names in recruitment for different posts and functions such as consular, diplomatic, legal, etc., and designing a more scientific recruitment and assessment method, so as to further select comprehensive talents with good political quality, strong

professional ability and high business level, in order to make up for the shortage of talents in relevant functional posts. In terms of staff training, it should further ensure the implementation of business training and policy dissemination in place, so as to ensure the effective optimization of services.

## 6. Conclusion

Due to China's administrative system reform has been in the aforementioned government-market-society relationship framework, has been the local foreign affairs department in this relationship framework in a marginal position. Foreign affairs departments have the dual nature of internal service and management as well as opening to the outside world, and apart from the simplification of the foreign affairs office's management of commerce and enterprises, the successive administrative reforms have provided less clear guidance to other foreign affairs management work of the foreign affairs office. In the future, relevant research and practice should be equally emphasized.

On the one hand, from a realistic point of view, China's foreign affairs departments at all levels have not lagged behind in their institutional reforms; they have adapted to the requirements and trends of the national administrative system reform, grasped the spirit of the central documents, and followed the footsteps of the central government's reforms while exerting their creativity, exploring and developing independently, and have achieved relatively good results. On the other hand, the international environment and China's diplomatic situation under the unprecedented changes in the world, China's position in the international arena and the necessity of comprehensively improving the level of opening up to the outside world have put forward stricter requirements for the development of the foreign affairs departments of the Chinese government, and the opening up of the city to the outside world as well as the accompanying management of the city's foreign affairs should be given greater attention. How to better serve the country's overall diplomacy and local economic and social development in terms of diplomacy and foreign affairs management has become an increasingly important proposition for local foreign affairs departments.

In this research, it can be seen from the development history of the Foreign Affairs Office of Shaanxi Province and the results of its work in recent years that the local foreign affairs management departments have followed the footsteps of the central government to carry out institutional reforms and functional changes in the context of the administrative system reform, and at the same time, according to the requirements of the times, they have played out the special functions of serving the country's overall diplomacy and leading the work of the local foreign affairs and have continued to think about the role of their duties, forming a series of experiences and at the same time, encountering a series of predicaments. encountered a series of dilemmas. In the future, the government reform process should further promote the reform and innovation of local foreign affairs departments, pay attention to the relationship between foreign affairs departments and other government departments and social subjects, and at the same time pay attention to the design of procedures and the structure of talents at the micro level. In the face of unprecedented changes, local foreign affairs administrations should make concerted efforts to synergize the development of local foreign affairs management and service capacity, so as to lay a solid foundation for seizing the strategic opportunity period while coping with the high winds and waves, or even the turbulence of the stormy sea.

## References

[1] Notice of the General Office of the People's Government of Shaanxi Province on the Issuance of the Provisions on the Functional Configuration of the Foreign Affairs Office of the People's Government of Shaanxi Province (Provincial Overseas Chinese Affairs Office), Shaanxi Provincial People's Government Website, November 29, 2000.

[2] Notice of the General Office of the People's Government of Shaanxi Province on the Issuance of the Provincial Government Foreign Affairs Office's Main Responsibilities, Internal Organizations, and Staffing Provisions, Shaanxi Provincial People's Government Website, June 27, 2014.

[3] Notice of the General Office of the People's Government of Shaanxi Province on the Adjustment of the Foreign Affairs Office of the Provincial Government from a Government Subordinate Institution to a Constituent Department, Shaanxi Provincial People's Government Website, October 10, 2007.

[4] Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Deepening the Reform of Party and State Institutions, Website of the Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, March 4, 2018.

[5] Main Responsibilities of Foreign Affairs Office of Shaanxi Provincial People's Government, CNVISA Official website of Foreigners.

[6] "List of Foreign-Related Administrative License Matters in Shaanxi Province (2022 Edition)," Shaanxi Foreign Affairs Portal, January 31, 2023.

About the author: Chengkang Wang (2003.8.20), Male, Han nationality, Beijing, Bachelor's Degree, Foreign Affairs College, Unit Province City: Beijing, Unit Zip Code: 100091, Research Direction: Diplomacy and Foreign Affairs Management.