

When Western Administrative Theories Meet China's Government Reforms: Do they fit?

Leizhen Zang[^], Chenguang Sun^{*}

[^] University of Chinese Academy of Sciences, China; Peking University, China;

^{*} City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Embedded in the epoch of globalization, initiatives of governmental reforms among countries are intertwined, especially when these countries seek to gain wider experience from their counterparts' suggestible pathways. However, scholars are inclined to oversimplify their analytical frameworks when conducting comparative research on administrative reforms. This paper intends to interpret and analyze such simplification of comparative studies which might result in the continuing promotion of a failing approach or the aimless transplantation of other countries' reform experience and theories, the phenomenon not uncommon in studies of China's administrative practices. This paper reveals an overlooked context, namely, that the adaptation of international theories of institutional reform has not achieved the intended goals in China's case. Through our analysis, we aim to use China's example to highlight the need to consider its social and cultural context in adapting Western administrative theories, and to suggest how scholars can better advise the government in the process of administrative reforms.

INTRODUCTION

Whenever the issue of convergence and divergence of different social science disciplines is brought up for discussion, scholars routinely highlight factors relating to the context of culture, institutions, history, or society. A critical perplexity emerges when the discussion is in the context of governmental reform, namely, whether the one-size-fits-all doctrines derived from one nation's development trajectory are applicable to different countries. This is particularly important given that developing countries have made countless reforms aiming at facilitating the political transition, in accordance with different academic theories (Meier, Andersen, Jr, Favero, & Winter, 2015; Cheung, 1997).

In the field of public administration, developing countries in practice still quasi-universally adopt the current theories and principles from developed countries. Over the last 30 years, an increasing amount of less-developed countries, along with some of their developed counterparts (Dent, 2005), have implemented

or reconstructed administrative reforms in light of the initiatives of their academic advisors, most of whom have been grounded in a liberalized weltanschauung. How to evaluate the effectiveness of reforms, in turn, has revitalized the classic debate among researchers (Andrews, 2013).

When we turn our research interests to China, which has accepted the idea of "democratic meritocracy" as well as other Weberian principles into its administrative practices (Rothstein, 2015). Certainly, the impact of such reforms, in terms of their development path and potential to improve good governance, has been examined by a kaleidoscope of perspectives (Burns, 2000; Christensen, Lisheng, & Painter, 2008; Haque & Turner, 2013; Ngok & Zhu, 2007; Su, Walker, & Xue, 2013). However, since 1980, waves of theoretical changes have occurred in the academic field of international public administration, notably, with the successive proposals for reinventing the government theory, the entrepreneur government theory, the new public-service theory, the joint-up government

theory, etc. Accordingly, China also saw seven waves of government institutional reforms from 1982 to 2013, each of which followed a government turnover. While many previous studies have documented these reform efforts through case studies and cross-sectional data analyses, there have been few attempts to generally assess changes on institutional and agency staff that have occurred during the past 35 years. In order to bridge the research gap, it is necessary to analyze these changes between concentration and decentralization as well as the discrepancies between political ideology and practical outcomes. Nevertheless, researchers either implicitly defend the effectiveness of westernized experience by arguing that the lack of cultural factors and advanced economy market involvement in the upper political echelons hinders the positive “imitation of the West” (Christensen, Dong, Painter, & Walker, 2012) or chronically diagnose the cause of the formation for complicated relationships between Western theories and China's actual trajectory which is somewhat unlikely to breed independently indigenous doctrines (Zhang, 2017).

In order to highlight the strengths and theoretical limitations of our research whilst distinguishing it from other studies, we aim to address the following questions in this paper: (1) what is the relationship between China's public administration and the theory of international public administration? (2) Have China's administrative reforms, notably the administrative streamlining and the local delegation, reached their intended targets? (3) What can other developing countries learn from China's administrative reforms?

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: Section two reviews the development of foreign academic theories along with the topics of China's administrative reforms. In addition, section three introduces the changes in the number of ministries and the number of civil servants hired for the State Council. Moreover, section four points out what kinds of lessons we can learn from China's governmental reforms. Last but not least, section five concludes the paper, providing some potential policy implications for other developing countries.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF WESTERN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION THEORIES AND CHINA'S GOVERNMENT REFORMS

The high performance of government is deemed necessary to realize and improve a ruling party's political visibility and gain the support of citizens. Since World War II, most Western developed countries have undergone a major process of administrative restructuring. The unexpectedly hapless response to the 1970s oil crisis, along with scores of other public emergencies stoked by modern technologies, exposed entrenched deficiencies in many countries' administrative structures. These lessons prodded them to cut public expenditures, downsize the public sector and streamline public service in order to boost administrative efficiency and maintain the vitality of institutional forces. Theories on public administration, albeit in various forms, had a profound impact on the worldwide movements to reform government institutions. These renowned theoretical schools include the New Public Management, Janet Denhardt and Robert Denhardt's New Public Service, and the ongoing public administration doctrine of David H. Rosenbloom and Elinor Ostrom.

In the 1980s, administrative reforms spread throughout Western developed countries and newly industrializing countries, notably in the Former Soviet Union and Eastern European bloc, when the latter was endeavoring to make the critical transition to a market economy. This worldwide wave of administrative restructuring has thereafter remained in the limelight of both academic circles and the wider public discussion.

The 1980s New Public Management (NPM) reform, from which the important concepts of public accountability and organizations' best practice were derived, was once believed to be “one clear direction” to make a difference in the Anglophone territory and hopeful in those post-communist fronts. However, as noted by political scientists, those imperatives (norms of “Englishness”, the economic powerhouse, positive partisanship obligation and governmental scale) for the reform were highly difficult to accomplish in some developing countries. To be specific, researchers

found that the efforts towards sustainable development in late-adopter countries were inevitably hindered by a series of difficulties including governmental fiscal crisis, chronic economic slowdown, poor efficiency in the public sector, growing inflation, imperious bureaucracy, nepotism, lack of accountability, and corruption (Christensen & Læg Reid, 2002; Minogue & Polidano, 1998).

It is from here that an obsession with almost every country comes: How does the restructuring of government adapt to the ever-changing socio-political context at home and abroad?

Such reforms are initially expected to rationalize extant deficient institutions, create greater efficiency and improve the quality of public services. However, prescriptions from developed countries are commonly deemed too generalized or even too opaque to address the predicament of inefficient governance in developing countries. Nevertheless, despite the skepticism regarding their practical effects, these NPM-branded strategies spread around the world, aiming to answer pressing demands for decentralization, the public-private partnership, privatization, and marketization. Such a paradigmatic doctrine also played a role in China's 1994 tax-sharing and public expenditure reforms, focusing on the issue of government procurement criteria (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992; Pollitt, Birchall, & Putnam, 1998).

It cannot be denied that the Universalist modes of thinking and ignorance of regional particularities by worldwide organizations or western scholars have been given a remarkable degree of country contextualization during recent decades as a response to criticism from developing countries. However, the essence of "one-size-fits-all" philosophy has not changed much today. This can be seen in proposals for further deepening reform in China. The keynote in the proposals still was the privatization of State-owned Enterprises (SOE), tallying with reigning neo-liberalism tenets which failed to function in the face of America's subprime meltdown and the European debt crisis.

Actually, scholars hold different views on developing countries' NPM reform practices. Their academic discussions can be divided into three stages corresponding to different approaches. In the first stage, scholars focused on how developing countries would adopt NPM reforms from the perspective of history and culture. In the second stage, around the turn of the century, with the acceleration of globalization and the rising academic trend of "bringing the institutions back in" (Weiss, 2003), they tended to adopt the perspectives of institutionalism and globalism/cosmopolitanism and examined whether these countries should accept NPM reform practices. During the third phase, with the development of computer technology and other new techniques in the new century, contemporary trends like technological determinism and social

Table 1. Different Perspectives in Different Periods

		Accept NPM reform in developing countries	Prudently accept or hesitate to accept NPM reform in developing countries
1st Period	Historical Perspective	Hood (1991)	Hood (1991)
	Culture Perspective	Hood and Peters (2004); Pillay (2008); Samaratunge, Alam, and Teicher (2008)	Gendron, Cooper, and Townley (2001)
2nd Period	Institutional Perspective	Richard and George (2004)	Pollitt (2001)
	Globalization Movement	Kim, Ashley, and Lambright (2014)	Welch and Wong (1998)
3rd Period	Technological Determinism	Askim, Christensen, Fimreite, and Læg Reid (2009)	Dunleavy, Margetts, Bastow, and Tinkler (2006)
	Social Constructivism	Kaboolian (1998)	Elias (2006)

constructivism became the focus of analysis on how the conventional centerpiece of NPM principles would work in tandem with the fast-changing situation in developing countries (Table 1).

In recent years, following a new round of institutional reforms in Western countries, developing countries have also actively promoted administrative restructuring with the hope of modernizing their institutional setting and increasing the efficiency of public services. China is no exception. China has enjoyed benefits from Western academic theories in its political institutional reforms and has tried to improve its institutional setup through continuous institutional reforms.

Since the start of the reform and opening up in the late 1970s, China has conducted seven relatively large-scale administrative structural reform. These reforms took place in 1982, 1988, 1993, 2003, 2008 and 2013; it is clear to see that every generation of the CPC leadership had its own reform goal.

Taking into account both domestic contexts and international experience, measures in Chinese reforms look quite similar to reforms in foreign countries, especially Anglo-Saxon countries, suggesting that imitation may be taking place (Caulfield, 2006; Foster, 2005). In the policy-making process, an academic survey argues that Chinese bureaucratic cultures and practices have transformed various Western approaches (Chan & Chow, 2007). For further discussions of the correlation between China's reforms and international theories, the comparative perspective of these reforms and academic theories could be adopted. As showed in Table 2, each stage of China's reforms was not only based on domestic conditions but also had a strong correlation with international experience.

Macroscopic comparative studies emerged within Chinese academia owing to the knowledge demand of Western theories, for example, there are quantities of translations of renowned Western scholars since the Communist Party took power in 1949. These works contain James Buchanan's "government failure" Public Choice theory, Edward Quade's Policy Analysis

theory, Osborne's theory of Enterprise Government, Denhardt's New Public Service theory, and Rosenbloom's multiple public administration theory, which have become very popular in the academic circles, allowing Chinese researchers to refresh and redefine knowledge, along with research norms. Moreover, a number of monographs and research series have also blossomed, elaborating on the middle-range and micro-level comparison between China and other countries' governmental restructuring initiatives (Christensen et al., 2008). In addition, lessons arising from some unsatisfactory reforms elsewhere have also been analyzed in China. These academic works have introduced and further contrasted the previous theories and practices in Western countries, thus providing examples as well as theoretical implications on the theme of commensurability to help stimulate debates against doctrinaire practices. As a result, academic research in this area fuels reflection on meta-theory, methodology, professionalism and the importance of a global outlook. Such highlighting of worldwide trends in governmental reforms and institutional restructuring is expected to contribute to the international academic community.

Yet many Sinologists have identified a somewhat perplexing paradox. On the one hand, in the words of official propaganda, China has long believed in its uniqueness and official self-confidence in determining its developmental trajectory and timetable. Given the expression of the country's five-year plans, the party's propaganda system constantly emphasizes citizens and scholars' confidence in socialist ideology. In academic circles, some scholars also highlight the concept of "reform practices with Chinese characteristics" (Aufrecht & Bun, 1995; Huang, 2008; Warner, 2008), aiming to theoretically rationalize the old claim of the superiority of the socialist system and to internalize the perception that China's featured reforms did produce distinctive policy outcomes.

On the other hand, both Chinese officials and think-tank never ceased to resort to international theories and practices for designing and implementing domestic institutional reforms. For example, a growing consensus is that China is a theory consumer,

Table 2. Major Institutional Reforms in China and the International Inspiration (Theories and Practices)

Party Congress and Plenary Session of CPC	Topics of Institutional Reform	International Theories and/or Practices (especially in Western Countries) for Guidance	Reform Practice
The 12th CPC Central Committee meeting (Sept 1-11, 1982) and its 7th Plenum (Oct 20, 1987)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve government efficiency • Separate the role of the Party and the state, and make them operate independently and without mutual interference 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New Public Management Theory • Reforms Practice by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan 	On May 8th, 1982, the 22nd session of the 5th Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC) passed the resolution on Reform of Institutions under the State Council.
The 13th CPC Central Committee meeting (Oct 25-Nov 1, 1987) and its 2nd Plenum (Mar 15-19, 1988)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Separate the role of the Party and the state • Reform the cadre system • Promote economic and political structural reforms • Transform governmental function 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theory of Public Choice • The practice of power decentralization in France, Japan, Germany, and the U.S. in the 1980s 	The 7th NPC passed the ordinance of Reform of Institutions under the State Council.
The 14th CPC Central Committee (Oct 12-18, 1992) and its 2nd Plenum (Mar 5-7, 1993)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accelerate the transformation of governmental functions • Streamline administrative procedures and promote administrative efficiency • E-government (i.e., the "Golden Projects" of 1993) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reinventing Government Theory • Entrepreneur Government Theory • Flattening management in the governmental organization • The introduction of electronic government in the U.S. in 1993 	The 1st session of the 8th NPC approved the State Council's Institutional Restructuring Plan.
The 15th CPC Central Committee (Sept 12-18, 1997) and its 2nd Plenum (Feb 25-26, 1998)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State-owned enterprises (SOEs) reform • Develop institutional features to accommodate Socialist Market Economy with Chinese Characteristics • Deliberate and adopt plans to restructure the State Council 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Privatization and enterprise reform in the public sector worldwide 	The 1st session of the 9th NPC approved the State Council's Institutional Restructuring Plan.

not a proposer and provider. This situation implies that the localization of academic research, which is both an intellectual and a politics-driven catchphrase long advocated in China, has mostly failed.

How does China's administration reform practice absorb western theories? Several scholars do not endorse the way in many developing countries to deal with the reform, which drew on the administrative experience of their developed countries regardless of potential

cultural incompatibilities (Bhagat, Kedia, Harveston, & Triandis, 2002; Lachman, Nedd, & Hinings, 1994). Actually, those late-movers should indeed focus on the domestic application as well as adaptation of international approaches in order to survive in fierce global competitions and become less distracted by their counterparts' push. Analyzing the rationale of this "borrowing theory", Huntington (1997) took a historical example and denounced latent Western-centralism. As for China's developmental trajectory, he

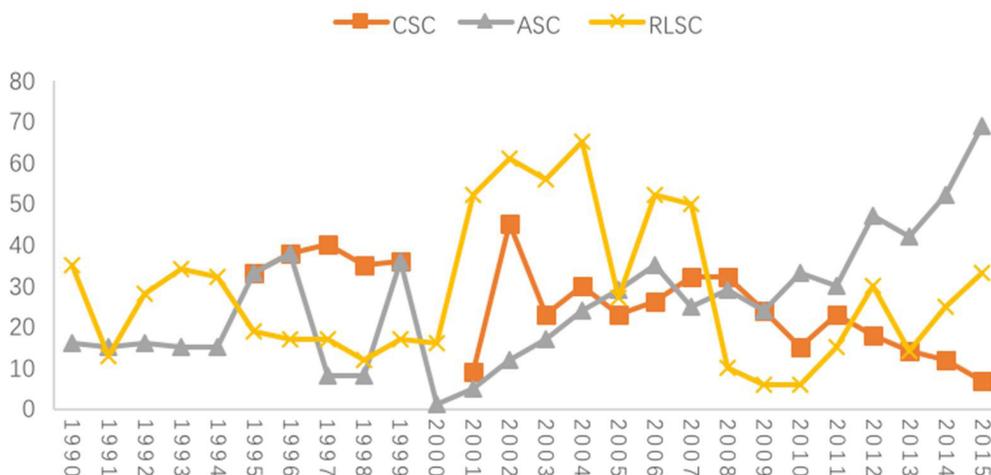
compared the diffusion of Indian Buddhism during the Han Dynasty with the Western-oriented transition after the opening-up of 1979. Ancient China's mainstream value system incorporated Buddhism as much as it supported imperial power and stability needs, but the "Indianization" of China did not progress further and Chinese culture remained intact, even reforming the Buddhist rituals and celestial brief systems within indigenous Taoism. Similarly, Huntington believed that Christianity, as a Western cultural export, would be absorbed but reshaped in a way that is compatible with the essence of Chinese culture, given the fact that "the Chinese have to date consistently defeated intense Western efforts to Christianize them" (Huntington, 1997). As an influential Sinology expert well versed in Chinese policy and diplomatic affairs, Dr. Henry Kissinger tends to endorse Huntington's perspective that China's path to global economic and political power cannot be arbitrarily attributed to an imitation of the West (Henry, 2011).

CHINA'S GOVERNMENT REFORM: GOALS AND REALITIES

If a theory is meant to guide practice, then, has China achieved its pragmatic or ideological goals through the adaptation of foreign reform theories?

Most of the existing research on this issue relies on

Figure 1. The Number of CSC, ASC, and RLSC



Data Source: State Council Bulletin, <http://sousuo.gov.cn/a.htm?t=bulletin>

key concepts such as administrative performances, the decentralization of authorities, fiscal revenues and expenditures or state capabilities. However, these concepts and terminology deriving from prevailing international management doctrines are hard to measure and vulnerable to lexical distortion or excessive deduction in practice. Therefore, it is difficult for scholars to analyze the actual effect of such reform.

In China's reform, two group of words are frequently used, namely, the decentralization of authorities and structural streamlining of central administrations, while the number of peer-reviewed publications on related topics has also grown exponentially since the 1980s, according to the statistics of China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI). Nevertheless, whether and to what extent have these two reform goals been achieved? Existing research failed to answer this question adequately. We aim here to start to fill this gap with two groups of first-hand data. The first group concerns the number variation in the Executive Commands of China's State Council and the second group delineates the change of the Council's structure, which is manifested in the overall number of new civil servants enrolled every year.

What can be learned from the role of the Executive Commands of China's State Council? Firstly, the Council issues Commands of the State Council (CSC), which are of equal status to administrative law in China, including regulations and decisions as well as declarations regarding different subjects. Secondly, it issues Announcements of the State Council (ASC), which include suggestions and information about specific public affairs. Thirdly, the State Council releases Reply Letters of the State Council (RLSC), responding to inquiries and

Table 3. The Number of Organizations after All Previous Reforms of the State Council

	Ministries and Committee (M&C)	Departments Directly under the State Council (DD)	Administrative Office under the State Council (AO)	Public Institutions (PI)	Total
1954	35	19	8	\	62
1956	48	24	8	\	70
1959	39	14	6	\	59
1965	49	22	8	\	79
1970	\	\	\	\	32
1975	29	19	4	\	52
1978	37	32	7	\	76
1982	43	14	2	\	59
1988	41	19	6	\	66
1994	40	13	5	11	69
1998	29	17	6	9	61
2003	28	18	4	14	64
2008	27	16	4	17	64
2013	25	17	7	13	62

Note: \ means figure-of-the-year unavailable. Figures come from the State Council Communiqués of the corresponding years.

requests or debriefing of provincial governments. CSC, ASC, and RLSC reflect the degree of central government intervention and control over local governments.

As Table 2 shows, China's reforms continue to emphasize the imperative of generally more decentralization and practically less central governmental interventions. However, Figure 1 reveals that the number of interventions and directives issued by the central government to local governments usually ebbs and flows. There was no significant decline in number, which arouses doubts about the actual effects of decentralization reform. Although it is often difficult to differentiate and prioritize the importance of CSC, ASC, and RLSC in the administration system, executive commands and orders obviously play a crucial role in China's politics. For instance, local governments still have to make requests to the State Council or central ministries to invest in public infrastructure, such as the high-speed railway. The Fiscal Transfer Payment System has become an important means for the central government to control

local governments in recent years. Sometimes, a third or even more than half of local government expending in some western Chinese cities comes from transfers from the central government, according to the national statistics.

Another group of figures sketches a somewhat disguised situation of apparatus establishment. The State Council Communiqué shows clearly the lack of quantitative changes in the institutional setting during each cycle of administrative reforms. As seen in Table 3, the number of Ministries and Committees (M&C) has decreased in the past 60 years, but the alternative departments increased in different forms mean the total number of institutes is relatively stable. This phenomenon indicates that the dismissed sectors in reform have transformed into other types of departments in China. For example, some central ministries will become state-owned companies in the areas of news and media, education, and railway. Therefore, it is argued that the cycle of downsizing and growth during administrative reform has never stopped. In fact, there has scarcely been any actual

streamlining in government organizations over the past 35 years.

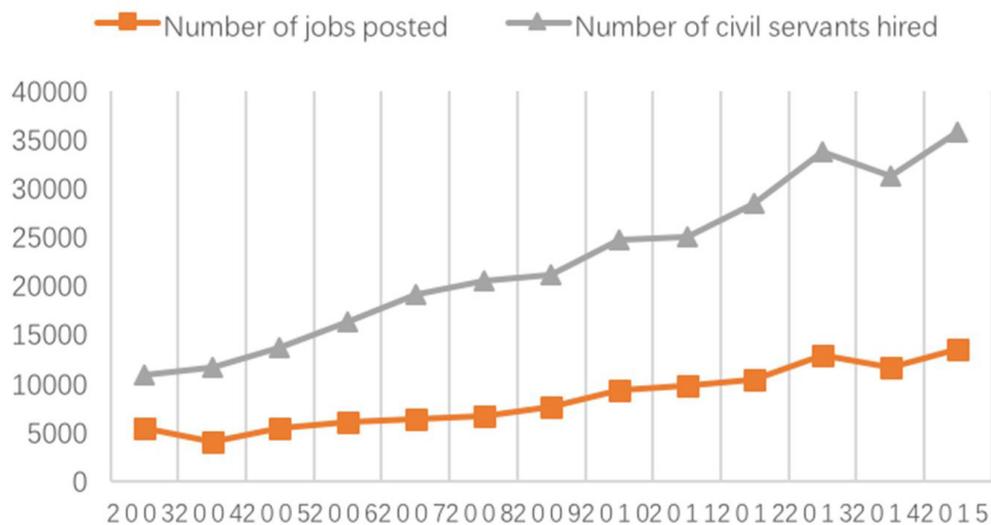
In addition, another concern is that the Chinese government is hiring more and more people. Figure 2 shows that the number of new civil servants in China has continued to increase over the past decade. It also suggests that the number of Chinese civil servants has not decreased in the past few reforms.

THE DIFFICULT ADJUSTMENT PROCESS BETWEEN THEORIES AND PRACTICES

The above analysis indicates that China's government reforms have not achieved the expected goals in theoretical research, although China is learning from the experience of western administrative reform. Thus, the following two questions are to be discussed: what makes it difficult for China's reforms to achieve their goals, and what enlightenment can China's experience and lessons bring to other developing countries?

The most important lesson concerns the danger of ignoring national context when implementing international reform standards in one country. It is widely believed that the practice of public management can consist of a general management model so that specific rules can be applied to different countries.

Figure 2. Number of Jobs Posted and Number of Civil Servants Hired in China Central Government



Source: State Bureau of Civil Servants

They tend to assume that China has similar conditions and can adopt corresponding reform measures, which has been proved effective in some western countries. However, the side effects of such a cognitive tendency are less accurate and usually ignored by academics. It may help reduce logical difficulties in comparative research but it also leads to studies divorced from realities and partially affects research outcomes. Methodological shortcomings would impair the effectiveness of theoretical applications. For instance, Chinese scholars are somewhat doctrinally following recommendations proposed by the World Bank and other international organizations. These economic giants have a long record of downplaying or ignoring cultural, historical, and institutional contests among countries when counseling on government reform.

In fact, previous studies have pointed out that differences among countries are objectively complex factors that cannot be wished away through some “universal” criteria. The potential causality between cultural background and the nature of government was widely discussed in Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture* (1935), Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba's *The Civic Culture* (1963), as well as Samuel P. Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations* (1996). Concerns about cultural differences can be traced back to the theories of ancient Greek philosophers (such as Plato and Aristotle), Enlightenment thinkers (such as Rousseau and Montesquieu), as well as modern liberal thinkers whose thoughts have been vividly illustrated in *The Civic Culture* (Almond & Verba, 1963). Some scholars focus on the formation of a country's unique legal system; Montesquieu pointed out that “the political and civil laws of each nation should be the only particular case to which human reason is applied. The law may be applicable to the country in which it is made, but it is not necessarily

suitable for all the countries (De Montesquieu, 1989). This argument was later supported by Robert Dahl who attributed the interaction between universality and particularity to the keynote issue of “the science of public administration”:

“generalizations derived from the operation of public administration in the context of one national-state cannot be universalized and applied to public administration in a different context. A principal may be applicable in a different framework, but its applicability can be determined only after a study of that particular framework” (Dahl, 1947, p2).

Those admonishments, both classically and contemporarily, remain fresh in the guide to administrative reforms. For example, the approach to governmental restructuring currently promoted by the World Bank belittles the differences in cultural backgrounds of countries. It is based on the hypothesis that “even if supranational governance is limited and hampered by divergent traditions, cultures, and political preferences, developing a baseline set of administrative law tools and practices will strengthen whatever supranational policy-making is undertaken” (Esty, 2006). This research hypothesis has long stoked intense discussions and debates. Moreover, policies associated with the World Bank, IMF and their donor countries often come under a barrage of criticism from staunch nationalist or protectionist campaigners. Therefore, to avoid critique, tactics such as downplaying disadvantages and exaggerating advantages of their conceptualization of governance are employed by these organizations.

Apart from cultural-background differences on both an individual and a social level, comparative research on governmental restructuring should not ignore the discrepancies in political systems. Each political system is embedded in a distinctive background which provides *a priori* mode for political thinking. The implementation of China’s institutional reforms is influenced by the government’s internalized socialist theory, encompassing the basic principles of Marxism-Leninism as well as China’s traditional

administrative doctrines and Confucian tenets on politicking. The initiatives of a nation towards institutional restructuring and the expected goals of this restructuring often reflect such ideological orientations, and foreign reform ideas should be adapted accordingly. Ideas or practices that have been proven effective in Western countries have not always had similar effects when blindly implemented in China. Regarding this, foreign experiences are of little help. Indeed, despite a gradual convergence towards global standards, China’s socialist political system remains unique, and the introduction of foreign administration principles is still challenging. As Joseph Strayer warns, “institutions and beliefs must take root in native soil, or they will wither” (Strayer, 1963).

The biggest difference between China and western countries is the relationship between the central and local governments, as well as the difference between federalism and unitary. Changing socioeconomic circumstances can impact the operation of local government in unique ways to each country. In sum, the structural changes brought by globalization, the evolution of political systems, and demographic variations all play an important role in government reforms (Andrew & Goldsmith, 1998). Those considerations, however, do not underestimate the importance of conducting international comparative research. For example, how to strengthen China’s inter-provincial co-operation and why this is distinctive from America’s interstate relationships? What does it take to resolve the intertwined regional conflicts of interests in France? What can we learn from the French experience? Lastly, how can measures be devised to enhance the integration between different governmental levels, thereby avoiding severe confrontation between rural and urban authorities, which has been frequently observed in Southeast Asian nations? We should always remember the importance of discrepancies between social and cultural institutions when conducting such international comparisons.

Once a new public administration standard is established, path dependency makes it relatively stable over a long period of time. Ideas, regimes (standards), and paradigms not only derive from political system

innovation but also result in the formation of ideologies at various stages of institutional innovation. It is important for Chinese scholars to conduct rational indigenous research while making the best use of Chinese and Western cultural input and profiting from the critical uptake of Western modes of government reforms. Given the aforementioned analysis, further comments concerning research methods are required.

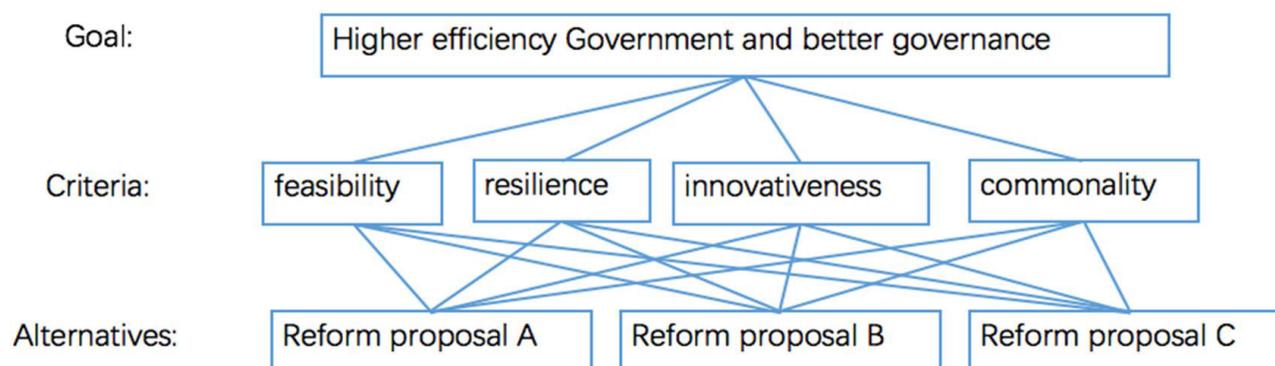
First, how can we understand the role of theoretical study in government reform? The features of governmental institutions are different in each country, but this fact has not stopped people from ignoring national differences in comparative studies. A hidden hypothesis is formed in the comparative study, namely, the whole bureaucratic system has similar features or will be transformed in the same way. It is particularly obvious in the comparative researchers on reform paradigms. If researchers ignore the differences in the social background between China and other countries, both theoretically and practically, this may lead to the misuse and abuse of foreign theories. Due to the arbitrary applications instead of empirical observations and factual descriptions, this kind of research approach can lead to biased conclusions, as criticized by Émile Durkheim: “instead of a science concerned with realities, we produce no more than ideological analysis” (Durkheim, 2014).

The empirical analysis of reforms since China's opening-up concludes as follows: institutional reforms in China were implemented during a period when the first priority of all reforms was to suit and serve the needs of economic competitiveness. China's institutional reforms, unlike those in Western countries, are thus economic-oriented model: over the past 30 years, the five-year governmental reform has always taken place concurrently with economic reforms. This conformity implies a high degree of correlation and interdependence between the political and economic areas in China. Although the government reform is to promote the development of market economy, it still contains a lot of ideological factors. Furthermore, China's reforms place greater emphasis on the role of leaders and the communist party, while western reforms put more emphasis on how to meet the needs

of voters. The emphasis on this difference will prevent our research from going to the risk of devolving into nothing more than “deeply significant nonsense” (Popper, 2012).

Second, how can we enhance the effectiveness of China's reforms? From the standpoint of dialectics, we have to admit that the Western theories of institutional reforms do provide new theoretical tools and examples for developing countries to establish new models of administrative management. However, we should not ignore the fact that Western theories and practices are based on a developed system of information sharing, organizational cooperation, and quality of government employees, which remains a remote goal for a great majority of developing regimes. Therefore, **on one hand, scholars need to learn from the advanced ideas and experience in the Western world. On the other hand, China's administrative reform also needs to find solutions from its own practices. And all of these are inseparable from the support of specific think tanks**, whose scholars of China introduce Western theories and practices as well as provide valuable information to policy-makers. When introducing Western theories and practices, scholars need to keep in mind the imbalance of development reality between North and South. In fact, we need to learn more western social science methods to analyze the reforms. For example, when it comes to case studies, the Analytic Hierarchy Process (see Figure 3) (AHP), put forward by Professor T. L. Saaty, an American operational research expert, has gained popularity among researchers who are struggling with comprehending the labyrinthine as well as unquantifiable differences among nations (Saaty, 1988). The AHP is a convenient, flexible, and effective multi-criterion decision analysis method notably applicable for the quantitative analysis of qualitative questions. Rather than prescribing a “correct” decision, the AHP helps policy-makers find a solution that suits their goals. It offers a comprehensive and rational framework for the structuring policy-making process, and for evaluating alternative solutions.

In China, think tanks are booming nowadays, which can promote **the effectiveness of China's reforms.**

Figure 3. The Simple Analytic Hierarchy Process Model

Improvements in research methods are more important. Using tools like the AHP, Chinese think tanks should provide alternative policy proposals and analyze the pros and cons of these policies according to clear standards. In other words, think tanks are the presenters of policy proposals, rather than advocates or demonstrators of them. Government officials need to analyze the characteristics of different policies and then make decisions based on the proposals of think tanks.

CONCLUSION

The reforms of China's administrative system have drawn lessons from foreign theories and experience focusing on two aspects: the decentralization of authority and the streamlining of the central administration. In this paper, we emphasize the need to consider the impact of country-specific factors in the processes of policy diffusion and transfer of reform knowledge. By doing so, we aim to avoid a single-minded theoretical transplantation as often found in comparative studies, while maintaining the ability to share lessons across developing countries. As it were, we are not trying to overemphasize China's uniqueness but rather, the inability to study its reforms through the lens of theories developed based on systems in Western countries. It is argued that the problem of "incommensurability" among cultures is an obstacle to our understandings of the formation and development of a certain political system. This is not just an epistemological consideration, but a real practical dilemma for comparative political studies.

Accordingly, China's experiences highlight the need to carefully consider the methodology of policy research.

In terms of the three questions we put forward at the beginning, firstly, the relationships between international theories and China's public administration efforts have been explained. Since the start of the reform and opening up in the late 1970s, China has continuously reformed its public administration. Policies in previous reforms, however, looked quite similar to those in western countries, indicating that imitations may have taken place. Besides, according to Lieberthal (1986), scholars who had been trained in Mainland China could hardly make a difference in the evolution of political science. Therefore, as is shown in our research, China's reforms of government were not only based on domestic conditions but also had a strong connection with international practices.

Secondly, the intended goals arising from administrative reforms are a castle in the air in China. Through our analysis, we can see that China has achieved institutional downsizing. For example, the central government institutions are getting smaller. However, the effectiveness of decentralization reforms in local areas still needs to be improved, and the central government can still intervene strongly in local governments. We believe that the Chinese government has not achieved the desired reform goals, which does not mean that the theory of reform is wrong but that we ignore China's special background when we borrow from western theories. In addition, the total number of

institutions is relatively stable, which is caused by the fact that lots of ministries and committees have been transformed into other types of institutions, bringing about nothing to change in China's administrative reforms. The number of civil servants has continued to grow over the last decade and the State Council has hired more and more officials, which might impair the ongoing streamlining process of central government. In short, we have made some success in previous reforms, but as for the expected targets, there is still a long way to go.

Thirdly, China's administrative reforms not only learn from foreign experience but also provide insights for similar initiatives in the developing world. The administrative reform itself is a systematic complex, which manifests both Chinese elements and Western fragments. Thus, the crucial challenge for China's governmental reforms is how to balance the impact of previous Western practices with its own experience or history. Many overseas experiences claiming to be universally successful are unsustainable as time goes on, which might not be suitable for one country's context embedded in the period of social and political transformations. Therefore, the ability of one countries' governmental officials and think tanks to judge and integrate are required for successful reforms. In summary, any designs of administrative reforms need to be examined, and their effectiveness should be reconsidered by means of explorations and experiments, rather than indiscriminate imitations.

To sum up, we cannot ignore the differences in context and political system between China and Western countries. Therefore, the best attitude towards Westernized theories is to be rational, which means that appreciation, as well as the criticism, should coexist when we apply the theories of Western public administrative reforms. In this way, we believe, the government can better carry out the public administration reforms and enhance its competitiveness.

It is worth noting that this paper explores the way in which China's government reforms have taken place in the past few decades based on the change

of central government agencies. And the roles of central government agencies in the extant research are not scrutinized (Ma, 2017). However, there still exist some shortcomings in our study due to reasons including insufficient official information, which necessitates more research into this field. For a long time, the public has known almost nothing about the policy-making processes of government reforms. In fact, it is difficult to find a special trigger to break the monopoly of administrative information held by the government. However, we hope that our study pushes researchers to open the "black box" of this field even further.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Leizhen Zang is an assistant professor of School of Public Policy and Management, University of Chinese Academy of Sciences; he is also an International Fellow of the Institute for Advanced Studies on Asia at the University of Tokyo. His research interests include political regulation and governance performance, comparative politics as well as political methods.

Chenguang Sun is currently a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Asian and International Studies of the City University of Hong Kong. His research interests include political sociology and international relations. He is now leading a research group on the topic regarding social dynamics of the revolt from the populist right political zeitgeist.