
Chinese Public Policy Innovation and the Diffusion of Innovations: An Initial Exploration

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Abstract: In a rapidly changing country such as China, how to promote public Policy innovation is an especially critical issue. Understanding how and when innovation occurs, and how and when innovations spread to other jurisdictions, is vitally important if the goal of spurring greater innovation is to be achieved. This article examines one particularly interesting case of policy innovation in China, the development of the "Service Promise System" in the city of Yantai. The analysis of this Case will provide the basis for a more theoretical discussion that combines insights from the Western literature on the topic with the specific characteristics of the Chinese administrative system. One of the key aims is to sketch out an agenda for future research.

Introduction:
The Importance of Local Policy Innovation
In a rapidly changing country such as China, how to promote public policy innovation is an especially critical issue. Over the past twenty-five years, socio-economic change has proceeded at a pace rarely seen in history. As the economy became increasingly marketized and society increasingly pluralized, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership quickly realized that the old administrative system was rapidly becoming obsolete, and that new methods of governance were needed. While this realization pointed to the need for pro-active reform, at the same time new problems demanding resolution were constantly emerging. Thus policymakers have faced a bewildering array of public policy issues, all intertwined within an unprecedented systemic transformation. In such uncharted waters, no reform blueprint or storehouse of ready-made policy solutions is available. Thus innovation is especially important. That is, if the government is to succeed in effectively managing the economy and society, policymakers must generate new ideas and action-oriented models. Muddling through is of course one option – and in some policy areas this is the prevailing mode of action in China today – but if China is to complete the transformation into a well-governed and successful country, public policy *innovation* is essential.

Moreover, although attention is often focused at the apex of political power in Beijing, local-level innovation is probably most significant. Officials at sub-national levels – in the provinces, cities, counties, townships, and villages – directly face the many problems of governance and must craft solutions. These officials, especially those in the middle of the system, are crucial actors in Chinese public policy, for several reasons. First, decentralization has given them substantial power and responsibility. Second, although

China is a unitary state, central policies tend to be vague, giving local officials substantial leeway in shaping local policies and implementation. Third, the center has difficulty in controlling its agents in the far-flung state apparatus. Lastly, the center tends to encourage local experimentation. Local officials thus are at the center of the battle to craft and implement new policies that address emergent and longstanding public policy problems. Local innovation has proven to be highly noteworthy over the past twenty-five years,¹ promoting even more local innovation would seem to be vital to the health of China's continuing transformation.

Closely related to the issue of policy innovation is that of the diffusion of policies across jurisdictions. From one angle, an innovation in one jurisdiction is often actually an adaptation (or wholesale copying) of a policy observed in another jurisdiction.² A policy innovation is transferred from one location to another. From another angle, if good governance is the aim, one would hope that a successful policy innovation in one location would diffuse to other places. Thus when considering public policy innovation, one must ask not only when and why innovation occurs, but also when and why innovations travel to new jurisdictions.

This paper examines one case of policy innovation in China as part of an initial exploration of two interrelated questions. First, in contemporary China, what factors help or hinder the generation by sub-national policymakers of new and innovative ideas? When do new ideas and models arise, and where do they come from? Second, how do new ideas and models diffuse across jurisdictional boundaries in China? What mechanisms are important in promoting or hindering ideational diffusion? Developing answers to these questions can not only help us to understand better the Chinese administrative system. It can also provide clues as to how to facilitate more policy innovation and foster

more diffusion of good ideas both geographically and across the many levels of the system. Lastly, research in this area can contribute to the Western-centric theoretical literature on policy innovation and diffusion.

Yet this paper will offer more questions and hypotheses than answers, for it represents just the beginning of a new multi-year research project. Moreover, to my knowledge, scholars writing in English have not yet attempted systematically to address these sorts of questions with reference to China.³ Given the exploratory nature of this research, it perhaps makes sense to proceed in a purely inductive fashion. I will begin with a description of an example of Chinese local-level policy innovation and transfer, a pathbreaking effort in the city of Yantai to improve the quality of public services. This will then provide the springboard from which to launch into a more theoretical discussion that combines insights from the Western literature on the topic with the specific characteristics of the Chinese administrative system. The goal will be to illuminate salient features of the Chinese system related to policy innovation and to sketch out an agenda for future research.

Innovation in Urban Administration: The Case of Yantai's "Service Promise System"

In 1994, the leader of a government department in Yantai Municipality⁴ introduced a pathbreaking new system, called the "Service Promise System" (*fuwu chengnuo zhi*), designed to enable his agency to do a better job of supplying public services. This innovation was soon adopted by city leaders and promoted in other bureaucratic units. Heralded as a successful model, officials in the central government in Beijing in turn attempted to facilitate its diffusion to other parts of the Chinese bureaucracy. Thus here we have a case of a local official who came up with an innovative solution to a vexing problem (an agency doing a poor job of providing public services), a city government that championed the innovative solution, and the diffusion of the innovation beyond its original jurisdiction. The rest of this section will examine these processes in more detail.⁵

The Problem.

As is well-known, over its history the state bureaucracy of the P.R.C. has often not done an especially good job of actually "serving the people."⁶ Controlling access to valuable services and lacking any accountability to the masses, cadres in charge of providing public services have traditionally displayed an anti-service mentality. Public services were of poor quality, *guanxi* (personal connections) was an important key to accessing government services, and citizens routinely had to face scowling bureaucrats for whom the notion "public servant" was quite alien. Thus in places such as Yantai, residents often have had to put up with poor public services and an unresponsive government administration.

As the provider of many basic services in Yantai, the Municipal Construction Commission (MCC)⁷ was the focus of discontent over the state of public service provision. As one official reported, the vast majority of complaints from citizens that reached city leaders concerned the MCC.⁸ Thus as 1994 began, the director of the Municipal Construction Commission, Li Dongxu, appears to have been on the lookout for new ways of dealing with the problem of poor public service provision and the "*men nanjin, lian nankan, shi nanban*" ("hard to get in the door, hard to deal with the bad attitude of officials, and hard to get things done") phenomenon faced by Yantai residents seeking to conduct affairs with government agencies. He would soon find a possible solution, an innovation that he could introduce into Yantai.

The Origins of the Yantai Initiative.

The story of Yantai's Service Promise System begins with a dramatic example of the international diffusion of administrative reform models. In 1994, the Director of Yantai Municipal Construction Commission (*jianshe weiyuanhui*), along with a number of other municipal and provincial officials (mainly from the *jianwei*), took an "Advanced Management Training" investigation trip to Hong Kong and Singapore. The trip was specifically for the purpose of finding out how these governments had tried to deal with problems such as bureaucratic inefficiency and the poor quality of public service provision. As the person in charge of overseeing the provision of many fundamental public services, Director Li Dongxu was looking for ways of improving the performance and reputation of his own piece of the municipal administration.

In Hong Kong, Director Li was introduced to an initiative called Performance Pledges in which administrative agencies would publish a set of "service promises" (*fuwu chengnuo*) and standards, while also setting up mechanisms by which the agencies could be at least partially accountable to city residents. Li Dongxu was sufficiently impressed by what he learned that, upon his return to Yantai, he immediately worked to conceive and implement within his agency a Service Promise System of his own, one that was closely modeled on what he had seen in Hong Kong. Consequently, he began an innovative experiment that would eventually get Yantai national headlines and help Director Li land a promotion to a post in the Ministry of Construction in Beijing.

Hong Kong's Performance Pledges system had been introduced in 1992 by then-Governor Chris Patten. Yet this was not a home-grown creation. Rather, it was modeled after the Citizen's Charter Programme that Prime Minister John Major had initiated back in the United Kingdom (Luo and Chen 2002, p. 353). Thus we see a long chain of policy diffusion – from the U.K. to Hong Kong, and then on to Yantai (and later, up to Beijing and to a number of other Chinese cities).⁹

The Citizen's Charter Programme and, by extension, the Yantai initiative were based on a set of ideas associated with the New Public Management paradigm in the field of Public Administration.¹⁰ This approach to public management (and administration) stresses (among other things) the need in administration for explicit standards and measures of performance, an emphasis on output controls, and the use of private sector styles of management (Hood 1991; McLaughlin, Osborne, and Ferlie 2002). In the reform of public services, the NPM paradigm calls for a new focus on "customer care", on treating citizens who use public services as customers and clients.

In 1991, John Major embarked on what was described as "a campaign to guarantee the rights of individuals against the inefficiency and indifference that is widely – and often accurately – said to plague Britain's faceless bureaucracy" (Gelb 1992, p. 11). Called by one scholar "an important political-administrative experiment" (Doern 1993, p. 17), the Charter initiative aimed at making service-providing agencies more oriented towards customer satisfaction. It was organized around six principles: standards, information and openness, choice and consultation, courtesy and helpfulness, putting things right, and value for money. In practice, for the most part it centered on "the publication of standards of service provision and means of public redress if these are not attained" (Chandler 1996, p. 3). Accompanying this was the idea that many public services should be exposed to competition, privatized, and/or contracted out (Lewis 1993). The goal was to infuse the bureaucracy with a service-oriented culture and to make it more transparent and accountable to citizens.

It is unlikely that Director Li understood or even cared much about the philosophical underpinnings of Hong Kong's Performance Pledges Programme – what he saw was a model that seemed to work, that was spoken highly of in Hong Kong, and that had a good pedigree (coming from the UK). He saw something that could be useful to him as Director of one of Yantai's largest yet most maligned agencies.

Innovation within One Agency.

Upon his return from Hong Kong, Director Li Dongxu apparently informally discussed with municipal leaders his idea of developing a new sort of mechanism to improve the performance of the agencies under his command. Then he convened several meetings with the MCC and came up with a plan to devise a system that would follow the spirit of and take some of the particulars from Hong Kong's Performance Pledges initiative. The new system would be called the Service Promise System (*fuwu chengnuo zhi*).¹¹ The first experimental implementation of the SPS occurred in June of 1994, in ten MCC units that were on the front lines of service provision.¹² Among these were the Municipal Gas Company, the Municipal Water Company, and the Public Transportation Company.¹³ In

January of 1995, a further eighteen units implemented the initiative.

The Service Promise System (SPS) centered on the publication by agencies of detailed Service Promise Statements (just as agencies in the U.K. had issued Charters). Although the precise formula underwent some evolution during the first year or two of implementation in the MCC, each statement was supposed to include several elements. First was a list of what services are provided by the agency, followed by a set of standards that the agency pledged to uphold in sponsoring these services. Next was a description of procedures to be followed when accessing services and time limits within which the agency must take action or respond (e.g. to an application or request for service, etc.). Lastly, the statements specified procedures by which a user of agency services could file a formal complaint with the agency and set out monetary compensation that the agency would grant in the event that it failed to respond to such a complaint in a timely manner.

As this suggests, the statements were aimed at making information available to citizens, forcing agencies to set and try to meet service quality standards, and setting up limited forms of accountability to the users of agency services. Each of these was something that had not been done before. Although in preceding years the city government had sporadically called on agencies to disseminate more information to the public, nothing much had ever happened as a result. The exercise of asking agencies to specify service quality standards was unprecedented and, for the first time, formally suggested that the agencies were actually there to serve residents, rather than to give them privileges or to lord it over them. Moreover, the most striking new feature of the SPS was how it gave citizens new and clear channels within each agency for making complaints. Typically, one office within an agency was given the task of taking complaints and acting on them.

Now, it is obvious that this sort of exercise could easily amount to nothing in terms of impact on an agency's service. No legal mechanisms were established. Citizen complaints could be easily brushed aside. And the standards and promises were set by the agency itself, rather than through citizen input or by an official with authority over the agency.

It is also true, nevertheless, that the SPS devised a potentially effective mechanism through which agency leaders could bring about some degree of change in how their organization operates and interacts with the public. That is, it was a mechanism to spur, from within, internal change in an agency. It was a method with which leaders could shape the behavior of those bureaucrats who were directly in charge of public service provision. As such, the degree to which the SPS would actually bring about change would depend mostly on the seriousness with which Director Li insisted on its strict implementation.

By all accounts, Li Dongxu pursued the effective implementation of the SPS with zeal. This is not hard to understand, for after all, this was “his baby”, and he had everything to gain by seeing it succeed. And he had ways of trying to achieve success. For example, he made performance in implementing the SPS and improving service quality a key basis on which cadres in his agency would be judged during the yearly cadre evaluation exercise (Li and Li 1996, p. 7). He also reports having authorized surprise inspections of units under his command.

As mentioned earlier, a full evaluation of the effect of the SPS on service quality is impossible due to the lack of data. Nevertheless, it appears that the introduction of the SPS did lead to a spurt of activity that resulted in real improvements. With Director Li breathing down their backs, those in charge of individual MCC units endeavored to be more user-friendly and looked for ways of making concrete changes. Though there is no independently-verified concrete evidence, it seems reasonable to believe that improvement did actually occur. Much was made at the time of the reported fact that calls to the Mayor’s complaint hotline concerning MCC units declined by over 50% after the SPS was implemented.¹⁴ If nothing else, residents probably found the MCC more willing to hear and act on their complaints and problems.

What we do know is that during the first few months of 1995, Party leaders in Yantai became convinced that the experiment in the MCC was worth expanding to other municipal agencies. Although this in itself is no proof that the SPS was generating real improvement in how MCC units operated and in citizen satisfaction, it suggests that the SPS was proving to be at least somewhat effective, while also presenting an attractive model in general. No doubt, Li Dongxu did all he could to convince Party leaders of the effectiveness and potential of his experimental system. Party leaders saw its merits and decided to make the SPS a city-wide initiative. In this way, the SPS idea emerged from within one piece of the city administration to become one of Yantai’s signature policies and, eventually, Yantai’s claim to fame within the Chinese state.

An Innovative System becomes a City-Wide Policy.

Party leaders in Yantai shared with Li Dongxu the interest in finding ways to improve the operation of the municipal bureaucracy and to increase public satisfaction with government. It seems clear that for both Li and city leaders, the interest in this was driven to a substantial degree by the desire to be noticed and perhaps rewarded by their superiors at the provincial level and in Beijing. That is, it does not appear that they were under any sort of real pressure from above to actually do something significant to improve the quality of public service provision. This was rather one of those areas in which strong action was in effect, optional. In fact, it was also an area in which an innovative and successful policy just might enable a municipal

leadership to stand out among its peers in the eyes of a select group of powerholders in Beijing. As was discussed above, the SPS could easily turn into a toothless initiative. Yet the SPS could make a real difference – if city leaders pushed it hard and ensured that there was real and continual pressure on individual units to accomplish it faithfully.

In May of 1995, Yantai municipal government began the effort to get the SPS implemented throughout the service-providing parts of the bureaucracy.¹⁵ First, twelve agencies were instructed to draw up their own service promise statements and to activate the SPS in each of their service-providing units. Included among these were the Bureau of Post and Telecommunication, the Bureau of Industry and Commerce, and the Municipal Transportation Commission.¹⁶ Over the next two years more agencies were added, so that by 1999, a total of 26 agencies had established the SPS. This involved the production of multiple service promise statements within each agency (as each unit would produce its own). The SPS was, of course, more important in some agencies than in others, according to how much “service-providing” the agency actually did. A city-wide guide to service promise statements that was published in late 1997 listed 53 service-providing units as participants in the scheme, of which seventeen were part of the Municipal Construction Commission.

The city-wide drive to implement the SPS and to improve the quality of public service provision involved action in a number of areas. First, the government undertook to instruct agencies in how to draw up a service promise statement and create the administrative infrastructure needed to support it. Second, some attention was given to holding intra-agency training sessions to educate front-line staff about the SPS and principles of good service. A third, and very important, aspect of the effort centered on publicity. The fifth and final area was the creation of mechanisms through which to evaluate and supervise agency performance in implementing the SPS and in providing public services.

Much more could be said about these five aspects and the implementation of the SPS. Yet that would be moving beyond the scope of this paper. For what is of interest here is that the Yantai government did in fact take relatively strong steps to initiate an innovative new system within the bureaucracy, one that also involved a new policy governing bureaucrat-citizen interactions. The government’s effort in this regard, while not completely successful, was far from superficial. Despite problems in effectively evaluating and monitoring the functioning of the SPS, it seems clear that city leaders exerted significant pressure on agency officials to make improvements in the quality of public services and in agency interaction with members of the public. The Yantai government’s championing of the SPS idea and the goals of improving service quality created an environment in which agencies had to at least make some efforts in that direction. Moreover, some

agencies could grasp the opportunity to make real changes that would gain them accolades from city leaders and in the media. In general, agency leaders seem to have realized that they had better make at least some improvement in order to avoid negative scrutiny by their superiors. The city government used the results of the Democratic Evaluation and its own other informal investigations to recognize good performers. For example, in March of 1998, the Yantai Party Committee and People's Government issued an "Honor Role" (*guangrong ce*) that listed 15 units, five agency leaders, and 53 mid or low-level officials as doing an exceptional job of implementing the SPS.¹⁷

In short, city leaders were committed to seeing the SPS succeed, at least to a degree. And some agency leaders also pursued the goal of improving the quality of public service provision with a certain zeal.¹⁸ Key officials in Yantai thus embraced Director Li's innovative policy and promoted it as a key accomplishment of the Yantai Municipal Government.

Efforts to Transfer the Innovation to other Localities and Bureaucracies.

During 1996, a full-scale push to spread the Service Promise System model to other cities and parts of the administrative bureaucracy got under way. A set of ideas for how to improve the provision of public services that originated in the United Kingdom now began to diffuse out of the city of Yantai and across the vast Chinese bureaucracy. This diffusion began as a result of efforts by Yantai officials to achieve recognition from their administrative superiors (most immediately, in the Provincial Government). These efforts were successful and ultimately attracted the attention of national-level officials in Beijing. And once the idea had percolated up to the top of the system, officials at the top decided to use their influence to thrust the SPS onto governments in other municipalities and administrative systems. Two sets of agents there led this push: first, officials at the Ministry of Construction (the national-level superior of the Yantai Municipal Construction Commission) and, second, leading Party officials in Beijing who were in charge of the ongoing effort to battle corruption and irregular practices within the bureaucracy (i.e. those in charge of *jiufeng gongzuo*). In addition, people affiliated with the Chinese Public Administration Society also played an important role in popularizing the SPS.

In the latter part of 1995, the Yantai *Jiufeng ban* (Office for the Correction of Unhealthy Tendencies) sent a report on Yantai's efforts to implement the SPS to the Shandong Province *Jiufeng ban*. In response, on October 17, 1995, the provincial office issued a circular to all of its lower-level offices in the province. This circular noted that over the years many localities had used various methods in attempting to improve the functioning of the bureaucracy, but that none of these efforts showed the promise of or had succeeded nearly as much as Yantai's SPS. It called Yantai's SPS a

"breakthrough" and urged other localities to imitate it. Around the same time, a newsletter of the Ministry of Construction published a glowingly positive description of the Yantai MCC's SPS.

Subsequent communications eventually brought the SPS to the attention of Xu Qing, the Director of the national-level *Jiufeng ban* in Beijing.¹⁹ He was reportedly quite excited about Yantai's experience with the SPS and decided to make this into a model to be used elsewhere as well. In May of 1996, the national *Jiufeng ban* and the Ministry of Construction jointly sponsored a two-day set of meetings in Yantai on the topic of "spreading the experience of the Yantai Municipal Construction Commission's Service Promise System." Both Xu Qing and Hou Jie, chief of the Ministry of Construction, took part. A report on this meeting and on Yantai's SPS experience was later sent up to the State Council and received a favorable comment by Premier Li Peng.²⁰ And some months later, a "Meeting to Report on the Yantai Experience" was held in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. Thus not only had Yantai gotten itself into the spotlight, but it also seemed to have actually produced an idea that could prove useful in agencies across the country.

Shortly thereafter, the effort to spread the SPS proceeded on several different fronts. In June of 1996, the Party Ministry of Construction issued a "decision" to all of its lower-level units asking them to study the SPS of the Yantai MCC and to work on inaugurating the system themselves. After getting approval from State Council leaders, Xu Qing and his *Jiufeng ban* decided to promote the SPS in two other ways.²¹ First, eight ministry-level agencies under the State Council were designated as test sites for the spread of the SPS. In August a meeting was held in Beijing to bring together relevant officials and get this initiative off the ground. Second, twelve cities were also designated as test sites, and in September a meeting focused on this proposal was held in Dalian. After this first wave of initiatives, a circular was jointly issued by the *Jiufeng ban* and the eight "test site" agencies that urged all local governments to adopt the SPS model.

Judging the degree to which these efforts actually resulted in the spread of the SPS would require a great amount of research and is beyond the scope of this paper. Scattered reports suggest that the SPS idea was adopted to one degree or another in some other places. An official with the Yantai Electric Power Bureau reported that his bureau started really trying to activate the SPS only when its superiors at the provincial and national levels started putting pressure on it to do so, suggesting that the SPS did indeed spread throughout this particular piece of the bureaucracy. And a 1998 article in the journal *Management of Local Government* described how, beginning in mid-1996, the government of Jinhua City in Zhejiang Province had implemented the SPS in twenty-three of its agencies (Zhang 1998).

In fact, according to a leading Chinese political scientist in Beijing, most local government just “went through the motions”, creating the appearance of an SPS without actually implementing one.²² His argument for why this is the case is simple yet insightful. In his analysis, the Yantai city government had a feeling of ownership over the SPS and saw clear benefits to be gained by making it work (again, at least to an extent). Yet whereas in Yantai the SPS was a home-grown innovation, in other localities it was just another policy directive thrust upon local leaders from above. Moreover, despite enthusiasm for the SPS on the part of the *Jiufeng ban*, a serious effort to prod local governments and national line ministries into adopting the SPS and making it work was never made. The *Jiufeng ban* lacked sufficient authority, and no monitoring mechanisms were set up. As a result, the SPS became something that local officials could safely ignore or just pay lip service to.

In the end, it appears that the diffusion of Yantai’s SPS innovation diffused to other localities and pieces of the state administration only to a limited extent. It proved difficult to engineer from the top-down the transfer of an innovative policy across jurisdictional boundaries. Why? Some elements of a possible answer have been alluded to above. It is time now to step back and use the case of Yantai’s SPS to facilitate a more general discussion of the politics of policy innovation and policy diffusion in contemporary China.

Policy Innovation and the Diffusion of Innovations

At the outset of this paper, two questions were highlighted. First, when and why do subnational officials generate new and innovative policies? Second, how do policy innovations diffuse across jurisdictional boundaries? At first glance, this division makes sense: one can look separately at policy innovation and at policy diffusion or transfer. However, on closer inspection, the two issues seem hopelessly intertwined because it seems that most policy innovations are not thought up *de novo*, but rather involve some degree of learning from the experiences of another locality. That is, there is usually some degree of policy diffusion or transfer involved, whether it takes the form of simply being inspired by a general principle used elsewhere or the wholesale adoption of someone else’s policy. Yet subsuming the study of policy innovation within the rubric of policy diffusion would lead to an overly narrow perspective on the politics of innovation.

In order to rescue the study of innovation from being overwhelmed by a focus on processes of diffusion, an analytical distinction is in order. That is, it makes sense to separate the cross-national diffusion of ideas from intra-country diffusion. Apparently, the question of when and why an innovation emerges for the first time in a specific country can be analytically separated from the question of why and how an innovation spreads to other localities within a country. The former question may very well involve learning

from abroad – the cross-national diffusion of ideas, and this can be investigated within the context of asking why an innovation emerged in a specific locality. The latter question gives primacy to processes of diffusion, but would naturally lead to an investigation of why some localities pick up on the innovation and why some do not.

In addition, studies of diffusion cannot shed light on a very important phenomenon: the emergence of people who, in the existing literature, are called “entrepreneurial executives” or “public entrepreneurs”. Innovations in governance generally need a champion. Bureaucratic agencies and systems resist change, and thus someone with the necessary skills and resources has to emerge to bring about change, to introduce innovation. The study of innovation in China and elsewhere needs to ask why and when such entrepreneurs emerge.

Consequently, we have an agenda for the rest of this paper. I will raise and briefly consider three questions that seem worthy of future research. First, what role do policy ideas from abroad play in facilitating public policy innovation within China? Second, when do entrepreneurial executives arise within China? Third, what processes of policy diffusion can be found in China? My consideration of each of these will be aimed at promoting research that would eventually generate ideas about how to facilitate more policy innovation within China and the transfer of good ideas across jurisdictions within China.

Foreign Ideas and Domestic Innovation

In recent years, many scholars in the West have turned their attention to the globally increasingly important phenomenon of cross-national policy transfer and diffusion. As Dolowitz and Marsh (2000, 5) put it, this literature is “concerned with the process by which knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in one political system (past or present) is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in another political system.” They note that the incidence of policy transfer increased substantially during the 1990s. China is certainly not alone in seeking to learn from and being influenced by foreign ideas. And the study of cross-national diffusion with reference to China can generate insights that can enrich the Western-centric theoretical literature on this topic.

The Yantai example highlights how Chinese policymakers can gain inspiration for public policy innovations during trips abroad. While the degree to which China should adopt ideas and policies developed in other countries has been the subject of intense debate within China over the past century and a half, during the reform era Chinese officials have made intense efforts to learn from the experiences of the Western world, in particular. Yet obviously, this process has involved what Pitman Potter calls “selective adaptation,” as policies are altered to fit the Chinese context and the particular

objectives of the importer (be it a person or an organization).

Three lines of research seem significant in this context. First, when do foreign ideas become the basis for innovative policies within China? The case of Yantai's Service Promise System suggests perhaps the most straightforward path through which this can happen: an official picks up an idea or policy that he can implement within China *essentially on his own authority*. This example also implies that when the new innovation is not threatening to the existing distribution of power and resources, it has a greater chance of being adopted. While hardly pathbreaking, these observations help to define the outlines of a research agenda. Perhaps certain policy areas in China more open than others to innovation derived from looking to foreign examples. Efforts to learn from foreign examples, through fact-finding trips, seem undoubtedly useful, but are some more useful than others? That is, do particular designs and agendas for these trips result in more productive trips and in more readily applicable lessons? Moreover, it appears obvious that innovation based on foreign ideas is more likely to happen on a very local and small-scale level, such as within a particular piece of an urban administration. This indicates that more encouragement should be given to individual officials to experiment within their jurisdictions and that lower-level officials perhaps should be given more chances to learn from overseas examples (instead of giving most chances to higher-level officials). Finally, there is the broader issue of why officials turn to foreign ideas and models. The theoretical literature makes it clear that this should not be viewed as a strictly rational, problem-solving approach, in which officials face policy problems and thus look abroad for the best solutions (Hall 1989; Ikenberry 1990; Nakano 2004). Officials do indeed search their environment (local, national, global) for solutions, but their choice regarding what ideas to import and how to adapt them to the local context reflects a highly subjective process of evaluation in which a variety of factors (such as self-interest, power considerations, etc.) play a role.

This last point leads directly to another core question and points towards a second line of research: to what degree are foreign models adapted upon introduction to China? And how does this adaptation affect the success of these policies in achieving desired outcomes? We need systematic studies of how foreign policies and models (or the manner of their implementation) are changed upon introduction to China and on what factors affect the degree of adaptation that occurs. When British officials visited Yantai to learn about the adaptation there of the U.K.'s Citizen Charter Programme, they were struck by how "draconian" the Yantai government was (in comparison with the British government) in implementing the new system. This was an adaptation that seems to have made Yantai's version more immediately successful than the British version. And yet one suspects that in many other cases, the

process of molding a foreign idea to fit into the local context weakens the impact of the new policy, making it less innovative and successful. There is a tricky balancing act involved here that needs careful examination.

Finally, and more broadly, there is a need to develop an overall framework with which to analyze the transfer of policies into China. There is no space here to delve into the intricacies of such an endeavor, so I will simply concur that the framework developed by Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) seems both promising and very applicable to examining policy transfer into China. Their framework consists of a series of questions: Who are the key actors involved in the policy transfer process? Why do actors engage in policy transfer? What is transferred? From where are lessons drawn? What restricts or facilitates the transfer process? How is the process of policy transfer related to policy "success" or "failure" (however defined)? This is obviously an exhaustive list of questions, and each points to rich opportunities for research. An important component of addressing these questions is a focus on the processes by which information is communicated. Wolman and Page (2002) argue that scholars of policy transfer should examine information networks that include producers, senders, facilitators, and recipients of information, looking especially at how "information is processed, framed, and assessed." This indeed seems crucial, for as they note, policy transfer is at heart about *learning* (be it individual or organizational learning), and so understanding the cognitive processes by which learning occurs is essential. Combining the Dolowitz and Marsh framework with Wolman and Page's advice to focus on information networks results in a promising way of organizing research on the cross-national transfer of policies into China.

Entrepreneurial Executives in China

The Yantai case illustrates the key role that individual officials can play in conceiving and implementing innovative policies. Director Li Dongxu, an administrative official, developed a new initiative, made it work in his own department, and used his skills and connections to promote the initiative to both local and national superiors. Not only are individuals important in generating new and innovative ideas, but also leadership is essential in propelling innovative initiatives to get off the ground and achieve any sort of success. Innovation challenges the status quo; bold and skillful individuals are immensely helpful in enabling such a challenge to succeed. The implication here is that to promote greater innovation in public policy in China, the CCP should do what it can to facilitate the emergence and activities of officials who take on the role of "public entrepreneur," "entrepreneurial executive," and "policy entrepreneur" – officials who are creative and who can use this creativity to develop and implement innovative solutions to public policy problems.

Of particular interest is a Western literature that explores entrepreneurship among public officials. In their fascinating edited book, *Leadership and Innovation: Entrepreneurs in Government*, Doig and Hargrove (1990) compile biographical analyses of thirteen “entrepreneurial executives,” government officials “whose careers at managerial levels were linked to innovative ideas and efforts to carry these ideas into effect” (7). On the basis of these sketches, they identified three personal attributes and four types of historical conditions that seem favorable to the exercise of entrepreneurial leadership within government that makes a significant impact. Replicating this sort of research in China would undoubtedly be fruitful. Who have been the most innovative local officials during the reform era? What are their backgrounds? Why were they able to succeed?

The work of Teske and Schneider (1994; also see Schneider, Teske, and Mintrom 1995) proposes an alternative yet complementary approach. Conceiving of bureaucratic entrepreneurs as “actors who help propel dynamic policy change in their community,” they eschew the biographical approach and instead argue that the emergence of these actors is a function of the characteristics of their community (331). This, of course, raises the question as to whether this may also be true in China.

Finally, although his focus is somewhat different, Mintrom’s (1997) work points to the importance of examining in detail exactly *how* these entrepreneurs identify a problem and work to obtain support for their innovative solution. Within the Chinese context, how do local officials not only come up with innovative policies, but also acquire the political support to implement these policies?

This is where the particular context of Chinese local government officials becomes especially relevant. Indeed, if studies such as these are to help to uncover ways in which public entrepreneurs can play a greater role in policy-making, they must clearly identify the structural constraints and incentives that shape the behavior of local officials. They also need to analyze what constrains or enhances the ability of these entrepreneurs to get their innovations activated. Certainly, of central importance here is the CCP’s Cadre Management System. All potential entrepreneurial executives in China must operate from within the Party’s nomenklatura and cadre management systems.²³ This means that they are strongly oriented towards pleasing their superiors in the Party, since their career trajectory is officially determined by the results of the yearly cadre evaluation. Nevertheless, at the same time, networking and connection-building is a critically important aspect of being a cadre in China. How these factors play into either stifling or encouraging innovative activity is not at all clear, which is unsurprisingly given the paucity of research on this subject. It does seem apparent, however, that since Chinese officialdom is organized into lengthy chains of

authority, stretching from the top to the bottom (in contrast with Federal systems such as the US), building flexibility into the system is key, as is the deliberate introduction of incentives for officials to take risks with innovative policies.

At the same time, the success of entrepreneurial executives in their efforts to implement innovative policies may also (depending on what sort of policy is involved) rest on their ability to use the cadre management system to prod lower-level officials to cooperate faithfully. Director Li in Yantai was apparently able to use his influence over the yearly evaluation of officials within his department as a stick with which to encourage front-line officials to take the SPS seriously. This may be sufficient for innovations within one agency, but for those of larger scope the problems of implementation are much more complicated. Thus the question of how to encourage entrepreneurial executives and their innovations also touches on the knotty issue of how to improve the facilitation of policies in China.

The Diffusion of Policy Innovations within China

In the case of Yantai’s SPS, diffusion of the innovative model took what is probably a fairly typical path. A locally-generated innovation was noticed by officials in the Central Government in Beijing, who then decided to promote it on a nationwide scale. This pattern of movement of an innovation from one locality to the Central Government and then to other localities is seen also in the United States (Karch 2003, p. 11). Yet beyond this simple observation lie important questions about the forces that propel or hinder such diffusion across different jurisdictions in China and in similar large states.

The Yantai SPS example highlights some of the mechanisms that are involved in the diffusion of innovative policies.²⁴ It may be useful to discuss these with reference to several steps that are involved in the diffusion process. First, once local leaders had come up with and implemented an innovative policy, they evidently made great efforts to get their innovation noticed by officials at higher levels of the Party-State. We see here a general feature of central-local interaction in China: local officials have to work to try and make themselves stand out in the eyes of their superiors one or more levels up the administrative hierarchy. This reflects a pattern of competition among localities for the attention of officials in the provincial and central governments. How is this done? It helps to have a policy that resonates with the prevailing concerns of the higher-ups (SPS spearheaded a concern to curtail corruption). But one suspects that personal connections are also crucial. And then there is the use of normal administrative channels, the sending of memoranda to superiors at higher levels of the state. In their effort to get their concept noticed, Yantai officials seem to have engaged in communication with both the provincial and central governments at the same time. In this case, the

innovators were entrepreneurial in trying to bring their new idea to the attention of others. Since this meant that the target was their superiors, it generated a pattern of local to center to local diffusion. In other cases, of course, local officials may go “shopping”, visiting other localities thought to be more “advanced” (such as Shanghai) in search of new policy ideas. This would lead to a local-local pattern of diffusion.

In the diffusion process observed in the Yantai SPS example, the second step was for central leaders to learn about and decide to promote the innovative policy. The decision to do this may simply occur based on relatively idiosyncratic factors. Yet it is worth asking whether there may be certain parts of the central bureaucracy that are more open and receptive to locally-generated innovations.

The next step in the process is an effort by the Center to promote an innovative policy. The Yantai example showcases some of the mechanisms the Center uses to do this. First of all, two departments took charge of the effort. Then circulars were sent to various parts of the administration and to local government offices, urging them to adopt the SPS. Conferences were held to disseminate information about the SPS and to generate publicity while also signaling the importance of the innovation. Finally, test sites were established – particular agencies and localities were given special attention and instructed to get into the forefront of the effort to implement the SPS in places other than Yantai. Evidence suggests that this drive to spread the SPS met with little real and lasting success. Why? Are these methods used by the Center to spread innovative policies effective?

Answering this question involves looking to the fourth and final step in the diffusion process: the adoption and implementation of the new policy by another organization or jurisdiction. In examining this step, two questions stand out. First, why and when would an administrative organization or local government take the step of adopting an innovation championed elsewhere? In the Yantai SPS example, other local governments apparently saw little benefit in adopting the SPS, suggesting that the main driving force behind the zeal of Yantai’s officials was the desire to be noticed by superiors. Perhaps local governments would much rather come up with something new than merely borrowing ideas from other local governments. Second, how successful is the Center in “forcing” the diffusion of innovative policies? Much of the Center’s effort in this regard seems to focus on cajoling and persuading officials to adopt and implement a policy, since it lacks the ability to enforce strict implementation of policy in many areas.

So in this area as well, there are rich opportunities for further research. Moreover, there is also an intriguing opportunity for comparison of the dynamics of diffusion across jurisdictions in China with the dynamics of such diffusion in the United States. There exists a large literature on the diffusion of policy

innovations within the U.S. While much of this literature is quantitative and thus sheds little light on the *process* of diffusion (what I see as the most interesting aspect of the phenomenon), some more recent efforts, including that of Wolman and Page (2002) mentioned earlier, are beginning to look more closely at *how* diffusion takes place. In particular, a recent Ph.D. dissertation by Andrew Karch (2003) presents a highly attractive framework for the study of the diffusion of policy innovation across American states. Karch proposes that policy diffusion consists of four political processes that may occur separately or simultaneously. His focus is on the state to which an innovation is being diffused. Thus his framework actually fits into the fourth step discussed in the preceding paragraph. Adapting the categories somewhat to fit better the Chinese context results in the following set of processes. Agenda-setting is the process by which a policy innovation gets on the agenda of the local government. Information generation is that by which local officials acquire information about the new policy. Customization refers to how local actors alter and shape the policy to fit their own agendas and local conditions. Lastly, enactment concerns the implementation of the innovative policy. While space does not permit further discussion of these categories, they may be a useful way of organizing illuminating and provocative lines of research into the diffusion of policy innovation in contemporary China.

Concluding Remarks

There is a pressing need for more research on the issues discussed in this paper. Despite the seemingly obvious importance of these issues, Western students of Chinese politics have paid relatively little attention to them. This has left a large hole in our comparative understanding of the dynamics of Chinese politics and the functioning of the Chinese administrative system. At the same time, the Western literature on policy innovation and diffusion is heavily slanted towards the study of Western societies; thus the degree to which the theoretical findings of this literature are applicable to non-Western societies and developing countries remains an open question. The study of policy innovation and diffusion in China would certainly enrich the Western-centric theories on which the discipline of public administration is founded. In this paper, I have made various references to Western theories and introduced some frameworks derived from Western studies. This is not at all based on any assumption that these theories are appropriate – the simple fact is that this is all we have to go on at the moment. The challenge for scholars of Chinese politics and administration is to build from of this existing literature and engage in empirical research that may very well result in serious modifications to these frameworks or the development of novel theories that have broad applicability.

Moreover, despite the obvious fundamental differences between the political systems of the U.S. and

P.R.C., intriguing parallels in the dynamics of the administrative systems reveal that comparison of the two cases can prove enlightening. Both states possess characteristics of what Laumann and Knoke (1987) call an “organizational state,” with highly complex and fragmented bureaucracies and dynamic patterns of organizational interaction.²⁵ More germane to the concerns of this paper is that the role and position of local government in the two systems are strikingly similar. Although in the U.S., local governments (states, cities) are formally independent, while in China they are formally but a lower-level branch of a unitary state, in practice local governments in both countries operate in a situation of constrained autonomy. In the U.S., the past two decades have seen a substantial devolution of power and responsibilities from the Federal government to the states (Conlan 1998), suggesting the degree to which the Federal government is able to constrain or loosen its influence over policy at the state level. And in China, the past two decades have witnessed substantial decentralization, with greater autonomy being given to provinces and municipalities. Thus in both countries, local governments are able to be on the forefront of innovation with regards to policy. Picking up on a phrase used in 1932 by Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis, Karch (2003, pp. 2-3) hails the American states as “democratic laboratories,” places in which experimentation and innovation enlivens and strengthens policymaking and governance. In the same way, local governments in China play a crucial role in experimenting with new forms and methods of governance. The practical question for China’s leaders is how to encourage positive innovation and experimentation at the local level while checking the tendency for local officials to act in dictatorial and corrupt ways.

Indeed, the overall point of this paper is to spur research on questions of practical significance. Despite the great strides made in China over the past two decades in re-fashioning the administrative system and reforming the economy, vexing governance problems and policy issues remain unsolved. Spurring greater innovation at local levels and smoothing the transfer of innovative policies among localities seems a promising avenue through which to generate solutions to these problems and create the conditions under which China can continue to prosper in the years to come.

Notes

¹ Perhaps the most famous and consequential example is that of agricultural decollectivization. In the latter half of the 1970s, before Deng Xiaoping and the CCP formally announced the policy of decollectivization, innovative experiments in this area were underway at the local level, most famously in Anhui and Sichuan.

² This understanding of policy innovation follows the classic definition introduced by Jack Walker (1969, 881)

in his seminal study “The Diffusion of Innovations among the American States”: a policy innovation is “a program or policy which is new to the states adopting it, no matter how old the program may be or how many other states may have adopted it.”

³ I must confess that since I am at an early stage of research, I have not had the time or opportunity to look for and read any Chinese language studies on this topic that may exist.

⁴ Yantai is a municipality located on the northeast end of the Shandong Peninsula, across the Bohai Sea from Dalian and across the Yellow Sea from North and South Korea. With a total population of around 6.4 million, it is one of the largest municipalities in Shandong Province. During the latter half of the 1990s (the period covered here), the municipality encompassed five urban districts (with a population of around 1.6 million) and eight counties or county-level cities.

⁵ The information reported here was acquired during research carried out in Yantai and Beijing during 1999 and 2000. Unless otherwise noted, the information comes from informal discussions with scholars and other knowledgeable people. I have tried to piece together a reasonably accurate story. I hope that Chinese scholars who may know more about the details of this case will alert me to errors of fact or interpretation. I wish to express my deepest gratitude to the many Chinese who have graciously offered their time and expertise, as I have sought to understand the dynamics of Chinese politics and development.

⁶ Of course, this observation could also be made in reference to many state bureaucracies.

⁷ The Yantai Municipal Construction Commission (MCC) is one of the core agencies of the municipal government and is responsible for overseeing a vast array of public services. As of the mid-1990s, it presided over several administrative departments and 28 public companies and service organizations (*shiyewanwei*). Some of the numerous areas within its jurisdiction were city planning, construction-related activities, taxi services, public transportation, public sanitation, and the public heating system. In short, the subordinate units of the MCC came into contact with and had an impact on the general population on a daily basis.

⁸ Director Li Dongxu himself wrote openly and frankly in the important national journal *Zhongguo xingzheng guanli* (*Chinese public administration*) about the serious problems within his agency and high level of discontent among the population with his agency’s performance prior to the experiment with the Service Promise System. See Li and Li (1996, p. 6).

⁹ Indeed, the ideas and techniques used in the Citizen's Charter Programme continue to show up in various places. In 2003 the Prime Minister of Nepal launched a new programme that deliberately copied the UK model (*The Rising Nepal*, 20 November 2003), while in India the Department of Posts released its own Citizen's Charter (*The Times of India*, 9 July 2003).

¹⁰ NPM ideas are seen by many as helping to drive a global public management revolution, shaping administrative reforms introduced in a diverse array of countries. See Kettl 2000; McLaughlin, Osborne, and Ferlie 2002. On the Citizen's Charter Programme as an example of NPM thinking, see Doern 1993, p. 22. For a broader discussion of the relationship between NPM ideas and administrative reforms in Hong Kong, Singapore, and China, see Cheung 2002.

¹¹ The full name is *shehui fuwu chengnuo zhi*, which translates more awkwardly into English, but which does suggest more clearly that the focus is on services provided to society (*shehui*).

¹² The information in the rest of this paragraph is from Li and Li 1996.

¹³ As with the other units under MCC control, these were administrative units directly attached to the MCC.

¹⁴ For example, this was cited by the Yantai Propaganda Department chief at a speech in 1996. See Rong 1997, p. 47.

¹⁵ See Wang and Ren 1997. The authors were the Party Secretary and Mayor, respectively, of Yantai at the time.

¹⁶ "Shixing shehui fuwu chengnuo zhi, tansuo jiaqiang zhiye daode jianshe xin tujing" ("Implementing the social service promise system: exploring a new way to strengthen the construction of professional ethics"), a report circulated by the Yantai Party Committee and People's Government at a meeting in Beijing, December 1996, published in the book, *Chengnuo zhi zai Yantai* (The service promise system in Yantai), p. 65-75.

¹⁷ The vast majority of these were part of the MCC.

¹⁸ An evaluation of the degree of success or failure of the Service Promise System in Yantai is beyond the scope of this paper. An innovation is an innovation, whether it is ultimately successful or not. At a most fundamental level, the goal of studying innovation is to determine how and when innovative efforts are made. The question of success or failure is a separate question. With regards to Yantai's SPS, it can be noted that although it did not produce a sea-change in how bureaucracy worked and in the quality of public service provision, Chinese scholars I have spoken with believe

that it did make some positive impact. However, the data needed to make a rigorous assessment of this question is lacking.

¹⁹ He was also the vice-party secretary of the Central Discipline Commission.

²⁰ This was noted by Xu Qing in a speech given in September of that year and published in *Chengnuo zhi zai Yantai*, p. 5.

²¹ *Chengnuo zhi zai Yantai*, p. 5-6.

²² For a more technical analysis of more fundamental problems with the SPS, see the excellent article by Zhou Zhiren (1997).

²³ Western scholars of China have carried out some initial research into these systems. See Brodsgaard 2002; Burns 1989; Edin 2003; O'Brien 1999.

²⁴ I must note that this part of the discussion is relatively speculative since I lack detailed information about the process of diffusion in the Yantai case. So my remarks concerning how this may have occurred is meant to be suggestive. I believe my interpretation is plausible, but further research would be needed to confirm its validity.

²⁵ Scholars of Chinese politics would do well to examine the seminal work of James Q. Wilson (1989) on the behavior of American government agencies.

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