China’s art of institutional bricolage:

How selectiveness in adopting policy transplants benefits a receiving nation

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Introduction: China’s gradualist style

In 2008, Harvard scholar Minxin Pei published his renowned book ‘China’s Trapped Transition; The Limits of Developmental Autocracy’. In this well-documented publication, he emphasized that at first sight China’s economic growth was and is impressive and that the grasp the Chinese Communist party seems to have on society is strong. But then, digging beneath the surface, he unearths social turmoil, corruption and an unhealthy interweaving of public and private interests in most areas of policy-making and entrepreneurship. The refusal of the highest authorities to go beyond merely consulting civil groups and citizens without installing true democracy led him to call the People’s Republic a ‘developmental autocracy’; eventually the internal contractions of this model would prove it unstable and self-defeating and a major crisis was bound to erupt at some point in the future. The People’s Republic of China would be trapped or locked into a gradualist mode of development. Had it been administered the political and economic shock therapy the former Soviet Union went through since the early 1990s, that would have been preferable. That might have been painful at first, but at least clear in terms of abolition of the Communist party system and its nomenklatura, and fruitful because of the separation of public and private stakes through privatization and liberalization. In short, there would have been something new to build on: starting from scratch would have proven much more beneficial in the long run. We should add in this context that Pei’s empirical map of the Chinese situation is far more detailed than that of the Russian one, so he does not actually conduct a systematic comparison. Nonetheless, it makes one wonder whether his view that of a brilliant insider
who keenly observes what most others overlooked or the voice of Westernized resentment unable
to accept the success CCP policy-makers have achieved and just out to spot certain Chinese
weaknesses to demonstrate his point that the communist regime will fall anyhow.

Several years on, the ultimate judgment on which developmental model is preferable in terms of
administrative stability and economic performance is not yet out. In fact, both China and Russia seem
politically rather stable at this point and their economic growth rates compare favorably with those
of most Western nations, especially the Chinese one. In addition, their geopolitical positions also
show an (increasingly) steep climb, again especially the Chinese one. Peter Rutland (2009) did make a
more systematic comparison of the developmental pathways both countries went through and came
to the conclusion that the current political and economic situation in both countries is comparatively
stable in spite of quite divergent trajectories leading to the current outcome. The performance
indicators he provides certainly do not lend credibility to the statement that Russia’s turbulent start
following international, predominantly Western, admonitions has been more economically beneficial
in the long run than China’s approach, which is based on gradual self-reform and lesson-drawing
from the experiences of its huge Northern neighbor. Nor can one say that Russia’s goodbye to
Communist ideology and its Leninist party system has led to the unambiguous adoption of a
Western-style democratic regime. In fact, Russia has bounced back to its more traditional
‘authoritarian’ political customs. Meanwhile, China has preserved the essentials of its regime, but
this does not imply that nothing has changed. Shambaugh (2007) has demonstrated that the risk of
atrophy of its Leninist overall structure in the face of modernity and globalization has been rather
effectively countered with pro-active and reactive adaptation measures and that the internal party
system has been reformed considerably. In addition, Shaoguang Wang (2008) far from shares Pei’s
view on this topic, neither his critical stance towards the continued influence of the CCP nor his
pessimism on China’s political and economic future. In a seminal article in which he introduces a
typology of agenda setting environments applicable to China, he asserts that the mere fact of having
periodic elections says very little about the influence of the wider public on policy-making practices.
Since Maoist times decision-making processes have grown increasingly open and less centralized. The concentration of power both in terms of initiating and placing policy issues on the decision-making agenda and the wider debate on these issues has declined over the past few decades. Although Chairmen Mao and Deng still wielded an enormous amount of influence as single men, since then the consciousness of various stakeholders, the growth of civil society associations and mass media and the enormous impact of the internet have made China’s political decision-making reality increasingly pluralist. All of this has occurred behind an official screen of CCP dominance, without universal suffrage, with most media even officially operating as the government’s mouthpiece. Not unimportantly, it is, in spite of all imperfection, supported by large segments of the Chinese population which is relatively satisfied with the political stability and economic prosperity the regime generates. Making a mockery of all emphatic pleas for dramatic foreign-instigated reform towards full market economics and representative democracy, Wang concludes that the whole term authoritarianism is simply meaningless. He writes with noticeable indignation:

‘Although the political process in China has yet to become as scientific and democratic as desired, the logic of Chinese politics has nevertheless been undergoing fundamental change. These profound changes in Chinese politics cannot be properly appreciated from the peephole of authoritarianism. Like a dog-skin plaster used by quack doctors in traditional China, ‘authoritarianism’, a concept imported from the West, has been randomly applied everywhere in the past century. Chinese politics has always been so described, from the late Qing dynasty to Yuan Shikai, the warlords, Chain Kai-shek, Mai Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin and now to Hu Jintao, irrespective of the earth-shaking changes in between. The term is so absurd that it serves more as an ideological curse than as an instrument for academic analysis. It is the time for researchers to forsake such nonsense once and for all.’ (Wang 2008: 81-82)

By early 2013, we can therefore safely assume that foreign-inspired reform from scratch has not been more successful in stabilizing politics and boosting the economy than a more gradualist path-dependent policy practice. If anything, the opposite may well be the case, since much of Russia’s
current wealth leans on the sales of its enormous fount of natural resources, while China’s economic
growth figures overall have been and continue to be higher and promote indigenous technological
development more.

This special issue of Policy and Society deals with practices and experiences in Euro-Asian policy
transplantation. In this first contribution as well as in the following articles of this volume, however,
pointing out which model is more successful or promising is not our main concern. We will not make
an attempt to assess the validity of Pei’s prediction, nor assess the claims made by Rutland or Wang
for that matter, but rather focus on the process through which policy-makers borrow institutions and
adopt policy concepts between Western (mostly European) and Asian countries. I believe there to be
much explanatory value in understanding how institutions and concepts are absorbed and
endogenized in any given institutional context. It is quite conceivable that Asia’s flexibility in general
and China’s versatility in particular can at least partly be understood by looking at the eclecticism
guiding their selection and acceptance process. I claim that this gradualist and selective approach to
policy borrowing allows for more freedom in revising original ideas to fit the domestic institutional
context and coalesce with extant administrative arrangements and underlying culture. Sweeping
reforms and revolutions, whether they be in France, Russia or China, have rarely achieved political
stability and economic prosperity or been able to sideline national cultural inclinations to respect for
hierarchy or reluctance towards transparency. What they have done instead is to wrap new radical
institutional transplants within existing politico-cultural reflexes and traditions. Lucian Pye (1992,
1985) has convincingly demonstrated for China and various other Asian polities that macro-political
behavior often originates in patterns of power exertion within families during childhood. Pye says
little if anything about Russia, but claims that Chinese patrons, even when compared to their
Confucian neighbors (Japanese, South Koreans, Vietnamese and Taiwanese), hail from family
customs at the micro-level and thus national political leadership traditions at the macro-level which
are deeply uncomfortable with multiple power centers. Dominant father figures are often trusted by
others to fulfill their duties with due responsibility and consideration. Moreover, these fathers would
also insist on having this vote of confidence with no backtalk. Such analysis at least qualifies theoretical and policy-oriented pleas for pluralism in China made by outsiders.

In order to answer the question through what mechanisms policy ideas and institutions are pragmatically borrowed in China and adopted in conformity with domestic cultural practices, the subsequent sections will address the following issues:

In section 2, I will provide an overview of the administrative mechanisms leading me to conclude that one can certainly speak of a gradualist and path-dependent view of institutional transplantation in China. Significant differences with the situation in many other Post-Communist systems including Russia will be spotted. In section 3, I will throw a specific light on the Chinese case by means of theory on policy transfer and institutional transplantation. Institutional transplantation is the transfer of policy concepts and institutions to a recipient country from either policy models promoted by international organizations or donor countries which are subsequently implemented in this recipient country (de Jong et al. 2002). I will claim that the selectiveness, creativity, flexibility and critical attitude with which institutional transplantation is applied in China proves to be a decisive point in its administrative stability and economic success. As an empirical illustration of the theoretical points made in sections 2 and 3, in section 4 the Chinese policy practice I am most familiar with, that of developing so-called ‘eco-cities’ is described and I explain how its adoption diverges from the Western examples from which the idea was drawn. I will claim that its outcomes, there too, may make Western analysts frown while seen from the internal logic of the Chinese institutional system the transplant might make good sense. Final section 5 will summarize the main insights derived from the Chinese experience with regard to the desirability of gradualism and eclecticism in Euro-Asian policy transplantation.

Mechanisms explaining the stability and continuity of China’s political regime
Immediately after the Fall of the Berlin, when ‘world history ended’ (Fukuyama 1992), it was assumed by many that ‘non-democratic’ and ‘authoritarian’ regimes were inherently unstable and in need of a sudden shake-up towards a viable developmental course, but some two decades on the situation appears to be far more complicated. Xiawei Zang (2010), the author of working paper No 2010/84 for the United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research, goes to great lengths to demonstrate that having an ‘autocracy’ or a ‘democracy’ in place is only a very fair predictor for getting policies enacted that successfully promote economic growth. He argues that it is vital to distinguish between good and bad dictators. Good dictators implement growth-enhancing policies such as investment in public education and infrastructure, whereas bad dictators tax their citizens for their own consumption. The key to understanding why non-elected rulers and the elites they lean on are curbed in their predatory activities and generate a larger economic pie for all is to what institutional mechanisms these elites are subjected. For the case of the People’s Republic of China, Zang gives four main reasons: (1) ever since China became a republic, political legitimacy has always depended on economic development, (2) relatively low tax rates have created a boost for private productivity, (3) the relative stability of the Communist regime has allowed leaders to adopt a long time perspective in their policies, and (4) it has been possible to circumvent the necessity to have a solid tradition in rule-of-law by having a strong and autonomous state as a policy-making vanguard with little to fear from civil society opposition and mechanisms through which certain elites discipline the state and impose constraints on predatory state behavior.

But then who represent these disciplining elites in China? Interestingly, this is where China parts company with most Post-Communist countries, because it is still the Communist Party. The CCP in China has always been a political organization with a strong ideological flavor which inculcates both certain normative values on its members as well as personal pride to be a part of this community and thus to stand out from the rest of society. The way the official ideology is fleshed out may have changed and presumably diluted over the years, but the focus to produce a morally inspired elite
able to lead the state and the nation has not withered away. Social anthropologist Frank Pieke has conducted a field study of the Yunnan Party School and concluded:

‘Cadre training at party schools not only creates or reinforces the official reading of the party-state’s power cult that is prescribed by the centre’s many policies, meetings and documents, but also more local and informal aspects that are every bit as important to survival in the party-state’s labyrinthine institutional environment. In particular, during their stay at the party-school, cadres get to know other cadres of similar rank from a wider administrative jurisdiction than the township, county, or prefecture that they work in. This experience creates a sense of belonging to a community beyond one’s own immediate peers of the higher-level administrative jurisdiction.’ (Pieke 2009: 37)

This peculiar socialization of talented and motivated individuals into an ideological elite community engenders both feelings of loyalty to a club with strong mutual ties and the opportunity to develop a specific type of guanxi: interpersonal networks based on quid pro quo relations. The expenses necessary for club membership can be seen as an investment in social capital which upon joining have the characteristic of sunk costs. The social capital created in a guanxi network is a fixed cost for the members, which enables the variable costs of contacts, negotiations and implementation of transactions between club members to be reduced to a minimum (Schramm & Taube 2001: 6). In a sense, one could say that membership of such a large nation-wide elite club could imply both ideological and normative rigor curbing members’ freedom to engage in personal rent-seeking practices and promote the goal of greater wealth for the nation but also the opportunity to use these personal networks for one’s own private gain and let corruption prevail over wider societal interests.

The Chinese guanxi networks developed within the CCP are thus club goods which can be used for efficient entrepreneurial activity leading to wealth generation in the absence of effective rule of law through lowering transaction costs (coordination mechanisms for initiating, conducting and controlling transactions in an environment characterized by high institutional uncertainty). But they can also engender suspicious transactions leading to indiscriminate corruption and rent-seeking without generating economic benefits for society as a whole. In this sense, the elite CCP guanxi
networks constitute a two-edged sword and their net economic effect depends on the broader incentives to which they are subjected. As remarked by Carsten Hermann Pillatt in his ‘Culture, Economic Style and the nature of the Chinese Economic System’:

‘One of the hallmarks of the Chinese transition is the merger between the roles of entrepreneurs in government and markets, with government units capturing entrepreneurial roles, actors shifting between spheres of the market and politics and rampant corruption. As has been noted frequently, political entrepreneurs in China provided one of the driving forces of change just because of their material interest. The result is a peculiar frame for market entrepreneurship, which operates on the basic assumption of dependency from the state. The dependency, however, is mediated via complex network structures that cross the formal boundaries between state and economy, and in which political and market entrepreneurs jointly negotiate the role of the ‘state’ as a reservoir of resources, both material and immaterial.’ (Hermann Pillatt 2004: 20/21)

The CCP thus constitutes the dominant organizational vehicle by which this entrepreneurial activity takes place and their members learn a philosophy that potentially ties them to responsibilities for the wider community. But is it possible to maintain a stable political regime generating economic growth while accepting rampant corruption and extensive rent-seeking behavior among its elites? It is exactly on this topic that Russian Alexei Shevchenko (2004) authored an extremely lucid article. According to him, party cadres in China are primarily motivated by two things:

(1) As public officials to maximize local economic output and productivity in the areas under their responsibility, making their performance record look good to superiors able to grant them career promotion, but also

(2) As private entrepreneurs to undertake (private) profit-making activities adding to their family capital.

The only way to make this combination possible was for the central CCP leadership to provide powerful incentives to uphold the necessary degree of compliance with central policies by limiting lucrative easy avenues for profit-seeking and value-subtracting behavior and by preventing the
formation of powerful interests capable of hijacking the reform process. The former objective was promoted by encouraging CCP elite members to produce large amounts of public goods such as infrastructures (socio-economically beneficial and profitable to project developers). The latter objective was realized by funneling all meaningful and important decisions to the CCP leadership and ideology, by forestalling large-scale privatization of public corporations and banks) and by imposing painful but necessary economic rationalization measures on State Owned Enterprises (balancing between pleas for radical reform measures to privatize them and keeping large groups of people employed by giving them preferential treatment and convenient bank loans). Consequently not a silent marketization process weakening the power of the state occurred, but a growing osmosis between state organizations, public enterprises and private corporations with the CCP guanxi cadres operating as a glue tying these organizations together in a propitious and profitable symbiosis. In Shevchenko’s own words:

‘Conducting gradual privatization focusing on small enterprises and keeping in check spontaneous privatization tendencies, the CCP leaders limited lucrative ‘easy avenues’ for profit-seeking and value-subtracting behavior. Wealth accumulation was encouraged through creation of new enterprises, not through privatization of existing ones.’ (2004: 175)

In other words, even widespread corruption need not be fatal to political stability and wealth creation if conditions are formulated where the creation of useful public goods goes hand in hand with private gain.

It is safe to claim that even if (Post) Communist systems undergo major transitions, whether they be Chinese or Russian, their newly evolving shapes still carry the footprint of their historical features and that their further development is therefore path-dependent. However, in spite of apparent structural similarity and even significant mutual policy-learning among the two major Communist regimes (especially from Stalin’s Soviet Union to Mao’s China in the 1950), a crucially different course of direction was chosen in China. In fact, the implosion of the Soviet Union and its East European
allies led China to draw mostly negative rather than positive lessons in the aftermath of the Fall of the Berlin Wall (Shambaugh 2007). As a result of divergent cultural values (Chinese have a much stronger preference for order, stability, continuity, emotional neutrality and harmonious, non-aggressive interaction than Russians, see Bond 2008), negative lessons drawn from the collapse of the Soviet Union collapse and a more critical stance to international, i.e. Western, advice, the Chinese leadership leaders made the survival of the Communist Party as a guarantor of persistent economic growth, concentration of power in its cadres and the osmosis between the public and private sectors the cornerstone of its (gradual) regime shift. The above allowed for sufficient wealth generated through entrepreneurial activity so that losers of the reform could somehow be compensated for their losses through general GDP growth and the expansion of beneficial public goods. This made the drawbacks of cadres that could not prevent themselves from filling their own pockets during this process bearable, unless the cases for corruption charges became too crass and needed to be punished by the central CCP leadership to keep society at large quiet. In Russia, where reform was not gradual, the CCP’s power was eventually totally replaced by semi-democratic nationalistic political parties. Large-scale privatization following Western recipes occurred leading them to be led and controlled by the same elites that had been party cadres before, but without the moral guidance of the party, its ideology, responsibility and clubby social controls. There, previous public monopolies became private monopolies or market leaders without societal responsibilities, without a mission to invest in public infrastructures and without the spirit to earn money through entrepreneurship rather than rent-seeking behavior centered around already existing assets.

Might it be that the worst transition countries can do is listen to and comply with policy reform advice from ‘bad Samaritans’ as Ha-Joon Chang (2008) calls Western and Western-inspired experts in international organizations? Such advisers recommend ‘transition’ and ‘developing’ countries to respect market principles and the rules of international capitalism as embraced and promoted by Western nations, even if this means a complete overhaul of their constitutional and institutional framework. The problem with this regime and/or policy transfer practice is not only that it reflects
the lack of historical awareness among many experts in mainstream economics (Hodgson 2001, Arthur 1994), it also shows a complete disregard of how national cultural values impact on political and administrative behavior (Hofstede et al 2010, Minkov 2012). In fact, it is intellectually dishonest: had Western nations followed this advice when they were still on their way to economic development, they would actually never have grown prosperous themselves. Active state intervention, protectionism, colonialism and an active enforcement of monopolistic positions were an integral part of their policies in those days (Chang 2008).

This leads us to the topic addressed in section 3: when importing policy advice from abroad, how can the corn be separated from the chaff? How can its suitability to the local institutional context be secured? And how do Chinese policy-makers go about doing this?

**Institutional bricolage: the merits of selective adoption and self-reflective emulation**

It is sometimes said that Westerners need to be ‘original’ when creating something, while (Far Eastern) Asians seem to be satisfied with good imitation and/or emulation. In fact, in Eastern good imitation is an art, and it would be silly to reinvent the wheel with much effort and painful trial and error if borrowing state of the art is both cheaper and more solid. For instance, when Chinese policy-makers or industrialists ask Western counterparts or consultants for support to innovation in their science parks, they tend to scan the world for proven technologies and impressive track records, not for risky prototypes that have not been shown to work in practice yet. Why try things out oneself if one can learn from examples and good practices around the world? A Dutch saying has it that it is preferable to ‘steal something good than to invent something bad’.

A superficial first look may lead one to believe that imitation and emulation imply the mindless copying of policy ideas, programs and institutions. In such cases the environment in which the transplant is to be utilized is largely disregarded, the local fit is ignored and the interplay with other
policy instruments and rules already in place is not taken into consideration leading to policy failure (de Jong et al 2002). This has indeed been demonstrated to occur worldwide as well as in China, for instance with the adoption of local transport policies (Wang 2010). But in many other cases adoption of original examples from elsewhere is not automatic and mindless, but far more selective and conscious. Those transplants end up functioning in suitable ways and may even be claimed to surpass the original. More generally, Chinese policy-makers appear to have adopted a great many pieces of civil or common law inspired legislation from Western countries and implemented them successfully at home, but without the concomitant broader aspect regarding rule-of-law and an independent judiciary, which are assumed to be fundamental to a decent legal systems by many Western legal advisors (Chow 2003, de Jong and Stoter 2009). It should be emphasized here that often these transplants appear to work effectively according to domestic policy-makers, while Western analysts would describe them as ‘not the real thing’ or ‘foregoing the essence’. It is almost the mirror image of 19th century conservative reformer Zhang Shih-Dong’s famous dictum (1837-1909) ‘Chinese learning for the fundamental principles, Western learning for practical application.’ (Fairbank 1986).

Likewise, Chinese tradition attaches far more value to social and economic rights at the family and group level than to individual legal and political rights and this is unlikely to change (Bell 2006, de Jong 2012). Does this imply Asian policy-makers are unwilling or unable to transplant concepts and institutions as they should or are Western analysts missing something here?

The call for successful cases they can learn from can be heard all around the country. To my knowledge, the best study on how exactly Chinese policy-makers learn from foreign cases in recent times was made by David Shambaugh. Referring to the impressive record Chinese policy-makers have on analyzing regime change and drawing lessons from abroad, he writes:

It is being undertaken for very specific and practical reasons: to anticipate what generic challenges to the CCP may arise (based on these other cases) and to draw practical policy lessons about how to meet them in order to maintain the CCP in power. (...) As in virtually every other area of China’s reforms, in the political arena the CCP is certainly willing to search for useful characteristics abroad, so as to selectively borrow from them, adapt
them, graft them onto indigenous Chinese institutions and practices. I have referred to this very Chinese phenomenon as China’s ‘eclectic state’. (Shambaugh 2007: 102)

But there is another famous case study which may throw some light on the debate, a historical case from the second half of the 19th century in Japan. Eleanor Westney (1987) has shown how Japanese experts in the Meiji restoration were sent out by their political overlords to various European countries to study policy-making solutions chosen there and bring useful lessons back home. This practice proved to be decisive in modernizing the Japanese state and administrative system. What is important to note here that Japanese experts were in charge of this process and established the usefulness of the foreign examples and practices by themselves, it was not done for them without them. When the Americans imposed their federal democratic constitution on Japan after World War Two, this can hardly be claimed to have been a voluntary process. But even there, the actual implementation process was conducted by the Japanese themselves, leading to marked deviations from the American original. There seemed to be nothing like a blind following of universal ‘best practices’ happening in either case, but rather an eclectic tampering with these original ideas making the adoption process as well as final institutional outcome resemble a piece of ‘bricolage’ cobbled together from a variety of sources, foreign as well as domestic.

Political leadership in China has, since the Qing dynasty until fairly recently, not often been in a position to determine its own pace in adopting institutions from developed nations. Consequently, it either saw itself impelled to accept the Western policy transplants under severe pressure, such as the French-style system of diplomacy and Anglo-American open market policies (Gelber 2009, Berridge 2010, Black 2010) or lean on Soviet guidance to set up its ‘people’s democracy’ with its one-party system and to transform its agriculture-dominated production mode into one driven by heavy industry. Both ways there was little in the way of truly autonomous and goal-oriented policy transfer on the part of the adopting country. Only in the brief, but turbulent interlude between the Qing and People’s Republic did nationalistic and currently still popular leaders like Sun Yat Sen make a serious attempt to settle for an independent national policy agenda aimed at learning from foreign examples
through adopting forms of republicanism, democracy and market principles, while holding on to strong national foundations (Fairbank 1986, Lieberthal 2004). He recognized that the only way to surpass the West was to learn from it, just as the Japanese had begun to do many decades earlier. It is well-known that his life ended long before he could complete the task he had set himself. This more goal-driven, selective and self-conscious approach to policy transfer only returned in the 1960s when Chairman Mao got deeply embroiled with his domineering Soviet counterparts. Since then he sought ways to overcome the cliff between China and the United States. Deng’s follow-up through the opening up and reform policy that started in 1978 and essentially lasts until today undertakes lesson-drawing from Western countries, and especially the United States, from a perspective of national usefulness for China rather than desirability as seen by outsiders. Chinese policy-makers have been quite pragmatic in this course of action. This is simply best reflected by Deng Xiaoping’s adages ‘it does not matter whether a cat is black or white as long as it catches mice’ (always taking usefulness first) and ‘feeling the river for the stones’ (promoting cautious trial and error and incrementalism). In spite of persistent dogmatism on official ideology (orthodoxy) where political rhetoric is always expected to be in conformity with the central party-line, quite a bit of local variety in the actual implementation is normally permitted or official recipes are not even followed up on across the board (heteropraxy), as long as such realities remain safely unnamed. Moreover, once it becomes obvious that adopted policy solutions turn out not to work in practice, they are often aborted and opportunistically replaced by something else without much ado. One could call this effectual practice in and perspective of policy borrowing one of low uncertainty avoidance, allowing policy-makers to tamper selectively, practically and synthetically with policy ideas and institutions from foreign and home grounds. Transplants are assessed on the basis of national (especially economic) self-interest, current (primarily political) agendas and practical (mostly technical) merits rather than on theoretical robustness, compliance with dominant economics or political ideals as propagated elsewhere.
In my own earlier work (de Jong et al 2002, de Jong and Edelenbos 2007, de Jong and Stoter 2009), I have emphasized the importance of considering policy transfer as a process of institutional bricolage where blind and slavish copying is to be avoided. Attention for creatively cobbling together various good practices in one synthesized solution, allowing maneuvering space for negotiation processes among various domestic players, a helpful but non-dominant attitude of policy donors and a good fit with already existing constitutional and institutional arrangements are key to successful ‘institutional transplantation’. In a similar vein, Radaelli (2004) has shown the importance of ‘contextualization’ in policy transfer processes. Most recently, the concept of ‘policy translation’ has been introduced, meaning that transplantation automatically implies the reformulation of policy concepts into their new national context, re-associating them with dominant concepts in this new institutional environment (Mukhtarov 2012). The main point in all the above arguments is that not an entire policy block or entity is transferred from A to B, but rather that the original policy is disassembled and reassembled and that the process along which this is done matters much to the outcome. The result of viewing processes of policy transfer in this way is that continued institutional divergence among transition and developing countries is natural, that this variety may often accurately reflect variety in preference and institutional aptitudes and that adopting nations with a more active and selective stance going against dominant advisors with universal recipes stand to gain from this attitude.

It should therefore not come as a surprise that Claus Offe (1996), when analyzing the transition process of various Communist and Post-Communist states found a lot of cross-national institutional variety and concluded that different countries adopted foreign-inspired institutions in different path-dependent ways. Meanwhile, in the official debate advisory recipes were often presented as timeless and universal. Western advisers often ignored the acceptance of the locally existing ideas and knowledge as well as the interests of policy actors enjoined and engaged with the official adoption. They barely paid heed to aspects of practical implementation for the promoted policy institutions. This precluded the possibility to utilize local knowledge and creativity, especially when it went
against the ideas of those advisors, an attitude they defended by making reference to the necessity of painful but necessary measures brooking no delay.

Because of the independent stance policy-makers took in China, the newly adopted institutions were incorporated in the existing framework rather than that a complete breach with history was realized. It reflects the characteristics of the existing Chinese system more, has not been directly or indirectly imposed by outside players but locally promoted, debated with the policy actors relevant to the implementation, thus merging international and local ideas in eclectic ways. Absence of rule of law, democracy, pluralism has been vigorously criticized for the Chinese context, but it remains to be seen whether standards for success of policy transplantation should be set by outside observers rather than inside users. In addition, it is far from certain whether Western values would have emerged in practice in China in the aftermath of the transition had international advice been followed up on, since they did not eventually materialize in Russia either, where the initial adoption of foreign ideas was far more direct and pervasive. Eventually cultural features and political traditions prove more lasting than many had anticipated, a phenomenon not unknown to leading political scientists such as Robert Putnam (1993) who has explained lasting regional variety within Italy from cultural differences.

The Chinese adoption of the eco-city phenomenon

In answer to its daunting environmental challenges (see for instance Yusuf and Saich 2010) and its drive to be a constructive world-player in the reduction of carbon dioxide emissions, Chinese policy-makers have readily adopted the concepts ‘eco-city’ and more recently ‘low carbon city’. The central government has enacted a number of laws and regulations to encourage its provincial and local governments to become pioneers in this area. A review of China’s policies regarding sustainable development shows that the central government intends to invest 2 trillion Chinese Yuan (about 133
billion US dollars) to promote a green low-carbon economy in the period 2011-2016 (Scientific American, September 25, 2011). The Chinese government has devoted substantial attention and resources to administrative capacity building for sustainable development by enacting new environmental legislation at various levels (Zhang and Wen 2008), such as the nation-wide promotion of eco-provinces, eco-cities and eco-counties (2003), and the Law promoting the Circular Economy (2008). In addition, a Green GDP Accounting Research project was launched in 2004 jointly by the State Environmental Protection Agency and National Bureau of Statistics of China in order to incorporate environmental degradation into traditional GDP accounting (Zhang 2007). Since the Energy Conservation Law was revised in 2007, energy conservation targets have been brought to the fore as an item when assessing and evaluating the performance of local government. These legislative efforts, along with the surge in eco-city initiatives around the country for which central government recognition is considered crucial, shows very strong (central) government impetus. In response, a great many cities have undertaken initiatives to build newly constructed or renovated neighborhoods as ‘eco-cities’ or ‘low carbon cities’. In fact, there are now more eco-cities in development in China than anywhere else in the world, a phenomenon attracting a lot of attention among foreign analysts. In the remainder of this section, I will first pinpoint how mostly Western theorists defined the concept and then attempt to explain how Chinese cities ‘bricolaged’ their interpretation of the eco-city in their planning and administrative practice.

In spite of the fact that there is a general positive feel about eco-cities and eco-city development, it is far from easy to find authoritative and unambiguous definitions and descriptions of this term. The English version of Wikipedia illustrates how many aspects and features are involved:

‘An eco-city is a city built off the principles of living within the means of the environment. The ultimate goal of many eco-cities is to eliminate all carbon waste, to produce energy entirely through renewable sources, and to incorporate the environment into the city; however, eco-cities also have the intentions of stimulating economic growth, reducing poverty, organizing cities to have higher population densities, and therefore higher efficiency, and improving health.’
‘A sustainable city, or eco-city is a city designed with consideration of environmental impact, inhabited by people dedicated to minimization of required inputs of energy, water and food, and waste output of heat, air pollution - CO2, methane, and water pollution.’

The original eco-city concept as introduced by Paolo Soleri (1974) and Richard Register (1993, 2006) featured the ecological carrying capacity of the bioregion surrounding the city as its key starting point. Operationalizing the implications of this approach for urban and infrastructure development and patterns of economic production and consumption is obviously not simple. Although the underlying idea of a closed loop of materials and natural resources is relatively easy to grasp at a theoretical level, the design and development ramifications for any given city are enormous and variegated. The literature on eco-cities tends to emphasize the importance of connecting urban planning concepts with the generation of next generation infrastructure provision and the implementation of sustainable architectural solutions in buildings, as well as strategies for ensuring economic vitality (Lehmann 2010). According to most recent authors in the field, the eco-systems approach is the most appropriate one to tackle issues of sustainable urban development (Newman and Jennings 2008, Suzuki et al. 2010, van Bueren et al. 2012). Eco-city development in its purest form revolves around the ambition to generate households, factories, offices, infrastructure facilities and open spaces that reduce the consumption of resources, reuses resources as much as possible, recycles waste and valorizes the remaining (or non-recyclable) waste streams by recovering energy and/or nutrients. It implies a number of new urban characteristics, including a different (much denser) utilization of urban space, different patterns of production and consumption relying on local resources, using primarily sustainable energy sources, eliminating current forms of individual motorized traffic, closing the water cycle and many more. In short, it requires a form of urban development that contrasts dramatically with prevailing consumer societies and with expectations of future inhabitants of increasingly prosperous Asian cities. Many of the above mentioned ideas are demonstrated in state-of-the-art architecture books such as those by Mars and Hornsby (2008), Keeler and Burke (2009), and Mohsen et al (2011). Such works contain instructions for sustainable
building, including roof gardens, passive buildings and water purification systems and renewable energy technologies integrated in buildings. Books such as Lehmann (2010) and van Bueren et al (2012) provide insights for addressing sustainability at the scale of the district or the city. Examples here include urban agriculture, sustainable landscape architecture where, for instance, water storage and drainage is considered as an inherent function of an urban district, or energy cascading where industrial waste heat is connected to urban district heating systems.

Meanwhile, these authors also make it clear that they are at this point only adducing ideas and small fragments for wider and more encompassing sustainable urban development, since eco-cities as such do not yet exist. This is simply because the level of integration and coordination needed for planning the city as one sustainable whole, which integrates other physical and societal functions in the city, is immense. What it would really take according to eco-city thinkers is a systems approach in which all flows within the city are viewed from a life-cycle perspective, since urban areas should gradually evolve into human or social eco-systems, a view expressed in Newman and Jennings (2008). This requires that in planning and policy-making all physical and social functions are considered in combination so that comprehensive change can be set in motion. In the World Bank report written by Suzuki et al (2010) a similar operational framework is adopted, rooted in four key principles which can guide policy-makers towards the construction of so-called ‘Eco-2-cities’, economically and ecologically sustainable cities. Their four principles probably give the clearest description of modern day orthodoxy on decision-making desiderata regarding sustainable urban development. These four principles are (1) a city-based approach enabling local governments to lead a development process that takes into account specific circumstances, including the local ecology, (2) an expanded platform for collaborative design and decision-making that accomplishes sustained energy by coordinating and aligning the action of key stakeholders, (3) a one-system approach enabling cities to realize the benefits of integration by planning, designing and managing the whole urban system; and (4) an investment framework that values sustainability and resiliency by incorporating and accounting for
life-cycle analysis, the value of all capital assets (manufactured, natural, human and social) and a broader scope for risk assessment in decision-making (2010: 3).

Other publications emphasize even more strongly the importance of voluntary awareness-raising, extensive public participation, constructive dialogue and consensus-building (Roseland 2005, Walker, 2005, Register 2006, Newman and Jennings 2008, UN Habitat 2007). According to Roseland (2005), democracy is even an inherent part of the sustainable development process. Sustainable development must be participatory development. Real visions for change rarely come from government or from the marketplace, but from civil society (Newman and Kenworthy 1999). For people to prosper anywhere they must participate as competent citizens in the decisions and processes that affect their lives. Consequently, it is not through a strong state imposing its will on corporations and citizens and admonishing them against unnecessary waste, but through actively deliberating citizens, conscious consumers and the bottom build-up of civic virtues and a strong civil society that eco-city development is to evolve. Through informed debate various sectors and stakeholders in the city can recognize their interdependency and learn to co-evolve toward sustainable urban development. What these authors do not mention in these characterizations of good eco-governance, however, are concepts of competing policy claims from various actors, trade-offs among conflicting public values, presence of deep political conflict and the need for legal intervention by public authorities against non-compliance. The notion that realizing eco-efficient buildings, promoting renewable energy sources and rolling back car-dominated mobility patterns may require persistent political struggle, tough legal and financial action against vested economic interests and penalties on high consumption is under-considered in these accounts. While the bottom-up solution may work in small pockets of comparatively wealthy, highly educated and yet liberal communities in certain Western countries, the question is how this eco-city concept has been fleshed in the Chinese policy practice.
In short, it appears that the push for eco-cities in China, after their growing popularity due to national legislation stems from local governments which see them as ways to enhance the attractiveness of their territories by offering more green space, phasing out manufacturing industries that cause severe air pollution and attracting high-tech and service oriented industries of which higher value added is expected. Their objective is to establish (green) knowledge cities generating higher levels of value added as their percentage of innovative companies increases. The best possible outcome for these local governments is for the Chinese national government (either the National Development and Reform Committee or the Ministry of the Environment) to approve of their projects and place them on special national lists. Moreover, if a foreign government is found to cooperate with the Chinese government and willing to engage in investment, policy guidance and technological advice, as was done for Tianjin, Suzhou and Guangzhou by the Singaporean government and for Tangshan-Caofeidian and Wuxi by the Swedish government, the highest possible status for an eco-city project is achieved. Chinese projects center more often than elsewhere on new constructions (because of real estate interests targeting upper and middle class demand for green, comfortable, more spacious and more suburban living environments), are mainly driven by business development, have a strong focus knowledge transfer through international cooperation in the field of green industrial and energy technologies, with political leadership and achievement playing an important role. Although environmental performance is not unimportant and the commitment to sustainability may be sincere, in the eyes of foreign consultants, engineers and architects, GDP growth and cost minimization prevail over reduction in carbon dioxide levels, the promotion of sustainable transport and life cycle approaches to water and waste.

Whereas the prescriptions of eco-city theorists imply that integrated sustainability and civic engagement are clearly more crucial than technological advancement and economic growth, the Chinese practice appears to have as its main goal to combine the two and is therefore technocratic rather than ecocratic. Citizen reactions are lukewarm and focus primarily on the desire for improved living standards and a clean and hygienic habitat for themselves. Although foreign experts often
complain that the implementation of eco-city projects leaves much to be desired, partly because of the lack of strict enforcement of environmental and quality standards and the reluctance to high spending on quality, the optimism among Chinese policy-makers remains invariably high. Suzhou and Tianjin in particular enjoy reputations as highly successful eco-city projects in China, partly because of Singaporean involvement in financial investments and relocation of national and international high-tech companies, partly because of their cleanliness, and especially because of their rapid expansion and high GDP growth. The more prestigious eco-cities have normally advanced eco-city frameworks and standards on the basis of which their environmental performance can be established and which foreign governments and advisors have helped establish. Foreign governments other than the Singaporean one (for instance the Swedish, German and Finnish ones) have not invested as many financial resources in their Sino-foreign eco-city projects, but have aided with scientific advice, town and infrastructure development and the establishment of green technology firms in science parks. Many but not all of their services have been paid for by their Chinese clients (de Jong et al. 2013). Less successful eco-cities have usually been able to attract some green tech firms to their science and technology parks, but have otherwise mostly focused on their urban and economic expansion.

Eco-cities thus equal knowledge cities and high-technology cities. To achieve this, cities actively solicit political and legal support from Beijing and knowledge input (and if possible investments) from a foreign government and its experts. At the local level, the city government is responsible for the general direction and drafting of the master plan-documents, but the district government has the funds to engage in more detailed planning and contracts out construction activities to project developers. Meanwhile, local inhabitants at best hear about the government’s intentions through the media or are unaware of the sustainability intentions their local authorities have with the space in which they live. It could be argued that the state-led policy-making Chinese style would be more amenable to integrated systems solutions for sustainable urban development, but in practice this plays out differently. In my own experience as an expert advisor to the burgeoning Sino-Dutch
Shenzhen Low Carbon City, the report we wrote addressed a great variety of ecological, economic, infrastructural, social and cultural issues and presented an integrated future vision (NGI & HITSGS 2011). These ideas were eagerly picked up by our clients (Shenzhen and the Longgang district), but in the subsequent adoption only specific elements (renovation of some Hakka-style buildings, erecting an exhibition hall and promoting a green tech science park) from it were implemented as stand-alone initiatives, while I felt that much of the original thinking in the report was missing out in the implementation. The coordination among the various departments to achieve an integrated implementation plan never came to fruition. I am inclined to agree with renowned China-watcher Lucian Pye (1992) that while civil servant loyalty to direct hierarchical superiors is strong and vertical organizational integration is well-secured, horizontal collaboration and coordination across organizational and departmental boundaries in the Chinese context is extremely hard to achieve unless emphatically enforced by top-leaders. This makes spontaneously emerging broad coordination and integration of various eco-relevant policy areas extremely difficult. The fact that eco-city concepts as such are comparatively abstract and their working out into practical solutions at the level of neighborhoods, town, districts or even cities is conceptually complicated and organizationally only reinforces fragmentation in the implementation phase. How can green roofs, natural purification of water, urban agriculture, a living laboratory for new service-oriented technologies, mobile smart grids and a transport system consisting of automated people movers and bicycles, among other transformative systems, be brought together in a synthetic plan and implementation program sustained by all urban departments?

It would be tempting to conclude that China’s adoption of the eco-city concept has been a failure. It can be characterized as ad hoc, fragmented, opportunistic and incomplete, to say the least. Many foreign analysts, experts and architects close to the implementation of the various projects in which this name is used have indeed come to this conclusion. It is also true that compared to the more successful cases of eco city development in cities like Stockholm, Sevilla, Freiburg and Curitiba the level of integrated implementation leaves much to be desired and the ecological benefits have been
rather bleak. Finally, most of the good governance precepts we mentioned before with a consensus-oriented approach among relevant stakeholders and a responsive government with an active citizenry were not observed.

However, leaving things at this conclusion would be foregoing the essence of how the bricolage of foreign transplants works as mentioned in sections 2 and 3. The modern Chinese way of transferring lessons from abroad revolves around letting the client set the policy agenda by himself, taking him and not the foreign donor as the yard-stick for success, allowing for gradual policy change and eclecticism in the adoption process and going along with domestically dominant institutional practices and preferences. Making a shift towards a sustainable economy can be a hefty one. Consequently, allowing for it to be made in conformity with an agenda still primarily driven by a wish for technological development, economic growth, a dominant state apparatus, opportunities for entrepreneurs at the osmosis of the public and the private sector and a comparatively passive and reactive civil society (which very likely would be less rather than more ambitious in promoting ecological interests other than environmental health in people’s immediate vicinity than governmental players) is presumably the only way forward.

**Gradualism and eclecticism**

The situation in eco-city development is virtually the same in most other areas of political and policy change in China: enormous progress has been made or is underway, but major challenges remain. The question is whether shock therapy as recommended by Minxin Pei and other critics of the Chinese political regime would have garnered more encouraging results, economically, ecologically, socially or otherwise. I believe it does not and that its consequences would most probably be unsettling to state and society alike. I have provided primarily a description of the Chinese situation, its dominant political and administrative features and the selective and gradual ways in which its
policy-makers at the various levels of government adopt policy transplants from abroad. Dominant institutional patterns and cultural reflexes do not disappear in the face of new policy changes, but tend to bite back with a vengeance if ignored through large scale system overhauls. This applies as much in the domain of political regimes as it does in economic reform and ecological modernization. I am in full agreement with David Shambaugh that this fashion is the Communist regime’s best chance to maintain its adaptability when dealing with novel challenges. To quote him once again:

Just as in its experience with economic reform, the CCP is most likely to pursue political reform incrementally: experimenting with new methods here and there, expanding them gradually horizontally and vertically within the country, embracing those that work while rejecting those that do not. In this cautious and incremental process, a new kind of party-state is being born: China’s eclectic state. Just as in the economy, society and other areas of development in rapidly changing China, contemporary Chinese politics will reflect a variety of foreign and indigenous practices grafted together into a new kind of political hybrid. (Shambaugh 2007: 181)

The awareness that ‘good governance’ is no longer a Euro-American monopoly and that even if it were, it could not be implemented without amendments due to cultural and institutional differences may be a reality foreign observers and advisors will have to live with, in China as well as in other Asian countries. Coming to this awareness and losing the false consciousness that one’s own economic substructures and socio-political superstructures are inherently superior is unsettling and may simply the emotional face of geopolitical change (Moisi 2009): Most people in Western countries will increasingly have to face the truth that not only they know what is right and wrong in politics in the early 21st century. Luckily the condition of having to lose this false consciousness is not a Western monopoly either. In the late Qing dynasty (19th century) most people in China and certainly the elite of scholar-officials were convinced of China’s superiority and its central position among the world’s races. They found it impossible to believe that the impact and sophistication of Western technologies, modes of production and governance structures could eclipse those in China. It forced astute observers and progressive reformers such as Daoguang, Lin Zexu and Li Hongzhang who suffered humiliation in the face of growing British, French, Japanese and American power to
wage an uphill battle to show their compatriots that their nation and its civilization were not automatically the center of the world from which other barbarian nations could and should learn. Perhaps just a dim reminder that might does not equal right, however tempting it is for the dominant and strong to assume that it does.

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