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From London to Beijing: Training and Development as an Agent of Policy Learning in Public Management

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The education and training of international public managers is a powerful mechanism for policy learning and transfer. In a way similar to the globalization of MBA studies, which has contributed to the international diffusion of Western derived management concepts, a number of countries are investing in overseas training programs for their public servants to bring back international “know how” and good practice. Although this practice has been coterminous with the expansion of relatively easier and affordable international travel, policy learning activity in the area of administrative reform appears to have intensified.

Though largely undocumented, the UK has witnessed a sharp increase in the number of cohorts of Chinese civil servants arriving to enroll in short courses. Many of these courses are conducted outside the University system and are arranged and hosted by independent organizations. Despite this being a growth industry, the impacts are unclear and raise a number of questions, such as, what is being learned about UK public administration and how much of it is being transferred back to China? What is it about UK public administration that has particular appeal to China? Although training and development may have a multiple agenda, the assumption is that its primary purpose is to facilitate knowledge transfer. This article sets out to understand whether this recent trend constitutes an agent of international policy transfer between Britain and China. To do this, the article analyses the nature of policy learning from the UK within a cohort of senior Chinese public servants.

Keywords: policy learning, policy transfer, management development, China

The use of overseas management development for civil servants appears to be on the increase from China. There are strong reasons and justifications for this. On the one hand, civil service reform within China itself has been gathering pace steadily since the 1980s while in addition, the educational profile of the civil service has changed significantly due to the expansion of higher education within the country (Burns & Xiaoqi 2010, p. 74). Within the broader context of civil service modernization, it appears that many central and provincial government departments and agencies are inclined to send officials abroad for training and development with many of them arriving in the UK. As Sun and Ross assert (2009, p. 96), “the initiation of overseas management

training programs has become a key human resource activity for policy makers.”

While official statistics are unavailable, a market has grown within the UK comprised of various companies or educational institutes who receive groups of civil servants and deliver training and development programs to them. This raises some interesting questions. Despite the very different administrative context of China, what is it about British public administration that has appeal to China? What is the content of learning and development programs and how transferable is it to the Chinese context? Within developing a wider understanding of the processes of policy transfer, does this trend contribute to theorization about the role of agency?

In relation to the latter question, the article begins with a consideration of organizational learning as part of the ideational approach to policy learning, identified by Evans (2004). The assumption is that overseas management development facilitates policy transfer through the content of learning and interaction with course tutors, instructors, and

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practitioners, rather than being the outcome of deliberative policy learning. This is followed by an overview of policy learning between China and the West, where the motive to learn from Western countries appears to be “aspirational.” Thus, a further assumption is that the Chinese government is not interested in specific policies or programs, with the understanding that real policy transfer will be hindered by overwhelming contextual differences.

The following section looks at how overseas training and development providers are selected by the Chinese government, which provides some insight into the scope and nature of policy learning. Here it is assumed that Chinese civil servants choose to come to the UK to learn “best practice.” To answer the questions above, this article draws upon the experience of a group of senior public managers at Manchester Business School, the University of Manchester in late 2010. Many UK universities provide formal courses for Chinese civil servants within their executive education programs. In addition, non-University providers in the market also provide similar programs. These providers are both British- or Chinese-run but are UK-based and often make use of both academics and university facilities.

THEORETICAL POSITION

This article is situated in the ideational approach to policy transfer, identified by Evans (2004). Located within this approach is a consideration of the processes within which policy ideas, techniques, and practice are exchanged. This follows the institutional analysis based on McAdam and Rucht’s (1993) “relational” model. The model is based on “direct, interpersonal contact between transmitters and adopters” (p. 59). Evans (2004) regards organizational learning as a constituent of the ideational approach and while this remains largely uncontested, the extent to which overseas management development for civil servants is a manifestation of a theoretical link between organizational and policy learning is itself, contestable. Busenberg (2001, p. 175) made the theoretical link between policy learning and organizational learning “because the process of learning and policy change usually involves organizational actions.” However, Busenberg’s analysis concentrates on institutional arrangements for organizational learning and the influence of policy networks.

This is where the theoretical approaches to policy learning start to diverge. On the one hand, the policy learning literature is derived from the field of political studies and is concerned with the behavior of political actors, structures and agencies when explaining policy learning. On the other, organizational learning has its conceptual roots in management and organizational science. Here the article is concerned with how training can facilitate policy learning as part of a program of management development for civil servants and treats both approaches as mutually reinforcing.

For instance, if we apply the learning organization concept to the Chinese government, overseas management development does show some of the characteristics of the organizational practices of learning, identified by Pedler et al. (1991). For instance, exposure to overseas practices arguably ensures that the participants act as “boundary workers”—collecting and passing in information from the environment and a willingness and ability to learn with and from other organizations is a key characteristic of Pedler et al.’s (1991) “Learning Company.” At the same time, policy learning remains a political activity (Common, 2000).

Evans (2004) also identified the process-centered approach to policy learning which assumes “rationality” on the part of policy makers, and is consistent with Dolowitz and Marsh’s (1996) identification of the processes of voluntary policy searching and subsequent transfer. While this approach helps us to understand how policy learning occurs, Evans (2004, p. 16) remarks that this approach does not explain “why policy transfer takes place . . . due to the absence of any reflection on the putative role of exogenous forces . . .” Therefore, this article draws upon organizational learning to contend that overseas management development facilitates policy transfer through the content of learning and interaction with course tutors, instructors and practitioners, rather than being the outcome of deliberative policy learning.

Yet, the outcome of learning—policy transfer—is difficult to prove (although not impossible, as Foster (2004) below demonstrates). The difference with the learning as mediated through overseas management development tends to be down to the general nature of the content of learning. Rogers (1995) explained how the characteristics of an innovation helped to explain adoption and identified complexity, or the degree to which an innovation is perceived as difficult to understand and use, as a possible restraint. Much depends on how well innovations are understood by recipients. Therefore, the difficulty faced in evaluating possible policy transfer through overseas development is mediated by the fact that in themselves, the programs deliver a wide and complex range of general topics rather than a focus on a particular policy field or reform. Sun and Ross (2009, p. 98) argue that China’s overseas management development is concerned with the broad ideals of embracing change in addition to improving performance “with an emphasis on business reality.”

Although the literature on policy learning was slow to develop, relatively early in its evolution was the identification of a typology of policy learning. The work of Bennett (1991a, b) considers the process of emulation from international policy exemplars as a form of loose policy learning, whereby exposure to clusters of attitudes and approaches is considered sufficient to ensure policy or program change in a receptive country. It is this process of emulation that seems to be driving China’s overseas development program, rather than a rational search for policy solutions (Yeo & Painter, 2011, p. 379). Emulation also fits with the ideational

approach as it involves the cognition and reception of ideas by agents who disseminate policy knowledge (Evans, 2004).

POLICY LEARNING BETWEEN “THE WEST” AND CHINA

To understand the role of training and development as an agent of policy transfer, we need to consider the extent of policy learning from the West in the Chinese context. One obstacle to such an analysis is that the study of policy transfer has developed within Western-derived theories of policy formulation and analysis which may also partially explain the lack of literature on policy transfer between China and developed Western nations. This section of the article assumes that the process of economic reform in China that began in 1978 has seen a transformation from a command and control economy to a market economy (with Chinese “socialist” characteristics). Thus, the opening up of China has brought with it an intensification of international policy learning. According to Lam (1995, p. 127), following the Third Plenum of the 8th National People’s Congress in 1995, three types of market economy worthy of emulation by China were identified:

- the Anglo-Saxon or American model (stress on individual effort)
- the Northern European Model (social welfare, worker participation), and
- The East Asiatic or Asia Pacific Model (collectivism in the market)

It was the latter that found favor with the Chinese leadership, with its mix of economic reform and political authoritarianism. Deng Xiaoping also dispatched officials to Singapore, considered as an exemplar of both modernity and Asian values (Tamney 1996, p. 2). It is clear that in the initial stages of opening up to the world, China preferred to look to its regional neighbors rather than Europe and North America although it became more “outward looking,” culminating in China’s accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001. Deng Xiaoping, regarded as China’s modernizing leader, promoted the idea that China could learn from other countries in terms of knowledge and experience (Common, 2004).

As a result of learning about economic reforms, attention was soon diverted to the development of human resources in the Chinese government. Sun and Ross (2009, p. 96) identified the “2002–2005 National Talent Team Construction Plan” of the Administration Office of the Chinese Communist Party and State Council as a pivotal document in promoting overseas policy learning:

To build up a management team who master the knowledge of international economy and law . . . to choose them

to take training courses both in China and abroad, to send them to learn, to practice in big companies abroad and to increase their managerial competence which complies with international business norms and regulations.

There are few studies that demonstrate policy learning between Britain and China. Foster’s (2004) analysis of the case of the transfer of the Service Promise System in Yantai Municipality actually revealed it to be an example of indirect policy transfer. In the event, this was a transfer of the Performance Pledge system from Hong Kong, which in turn, was an adaptation of the UK Citizen’s Charter initiative. Foster noted that the agent of transfer, in this case, the Director of the Yantai Municipal Construction Commission (Li) neither “understood or even cared much about the philosophical underpinnings of Hong Kong’s Performance Pledges Program—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 would be useful to him as Director of Yantai’s largest yet most maligned agencies” (Foster 2004, p. 197). Moreover, following its introduction in 1994, the Service Promise System was diffused across the Chinese bureaucracy, but only with partial success (Foster 2006).

Foster (2004, p. 202) believes the Yantai case to highlight how Chinese policymakers will gain inspiration for policy ideas from trips abroad; although it helps if individual policymakers have sufficient discretion and authority, as in the case of Director Li above. Although Foster provides us with a particularly detailed account of this case of policy transfer from the UK to China via Hong Kong, there are few other examples of such transfer that have been documented.

In addition to specific reform programs, China is not immune to learning from international reform movements that have been “globalized” by a range of international organizations, think tanks, and consultants. Despite their apparent attractiveness, including New Public Management (NPM) in particular, they lack transferability to the Chinese context. As Straussman and Zhang (2001, p. 419) remark, “Chinese officials are certainly aware of administrative reforms in other countries” and “are being assessed in Beijing.” Straussman and Zhang (2001, p. 420) also go on to argue that to adopt reforms from overseas would require a shift in values among public servants and the introduction of Weberian administration. Although the barriers to policy transfer are commented upon extensively elsewhere, this appears at odds with the apparent desire of the Chinese government to learn from Western nations with very different political, cultural, and economic contexts.

Therefore, it is not surprising that in line with the changing political ideology of the Chinese leadership, China traditionally looked to the former Soviet Union but it was with the shift to marketization that highly developed countries in the West became of particular interest to policy makers. Rose

(2005) notes this shift in relation to welfare. Learning from close neighbors in Asia is now shunned in favor of Europe, despite the “crises of the welfare state and the fact China cannot afford to adopt such programs” (p. 110).

The motive to learn from the Western countries therefore appears to be “aspirational”—the assumption in the article is that the Chinese government is not interested in specific policies or programs, on the understanding that real policy transfer will be hindered by overwhelming contextual differences. Instead, value is to be gained by exposing officials to the discourse of public management reform in countries such as the UK.

As Rose (2005, p. 39) points out, learning about failure from other countries is equally, if not more, beneficial. He argues that China learned much from Soviet failure and that the benefits “are as great or greater than the advantages the Chinese might gain from following best-practice prescriptions from the world’s richest economies” (p. 39). Although this might be true, China does not appear to be looking for negative lesson drawing in an explicit way. Of course, past learning from the former Soviet Union is more simply explained by ideological factors.

Although the obstacles to transfer from this perspective—such as cross-cultural learning (Sun & Ross 2009, p. 98)—will quickly become apparent in this article, there is no assumption that the Chinese government are actively promoting the Learning Organization concept, at least the ideal type promulgated by Pedler et al. (1991). However, overseas management development constitutes a form of organizational learning, only if that knowledge is communicated and acted upon. What can be observed are the “systems of ideas” or the content of management development programs but to demonstrate empirically that China has transferred, for instance, the competency framework within the UK Professional Skills for Government program, is beyond the scope of this article (I was informed anecdotally by a group of Chinese civil servants that something similar had been adopted, but I have found no firm evidence.).

Of course, the article has assumed that Chinese civil servants are coming to the UK to learn “best practice.” Thus, the ideational approach offers a better understanding of the type of policy learning between China and Western countries, as Evans explains:

This approach is particularly useful in helping policy analysts to identify potential obstacles to policy transfer and insights into how to develop a learning organization. However, policy analysts tend to assume that systems of ideas influence policy transfer rather than demonstrate it empirically. (2004, p. 14)

We now turn to how international providers are selected by the Chinese government for overseas development programs.

SELECTING PROVIDERS

How the providers are selected gives a very strong indication of where China thinks it should be learning from, in addition to developing a clearer understanding of the content and process of policy learning. Once the need for overseas training and development is established by a Chinese government organization, how are international providers selected? The role of the China Association for International Exchange of Personnel (CAIEP) is important in this respect. The aim of the association is to “promote exchange and cooperation between China and other nations in the fields of industry, agriculture, finance, science and technology, education, medicine, and culture through the international exchange of personnel” (CAIEP, 2011).

The CAIEP is an agency of the State Administration of Foreign Experts Affairs (SAFEA), which has a Department of Overseas Training. This is the starting point in the process. Government departments and agencies (including provincial governments) will propose development programs to SAFEA, starting with the choice of country first. The next step is the selection of training institutions or providers. These can be found on a list of official providers which is circulated to all central government and provincial government departments. The list is updated annually and inclusion on the list depends largely on the provider’s reputation. The United States is the most represented country on the list, with 72 providers headed by the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. There are 17 providers in the UK, both in the university and market sectors. In addition, Canada, Germany, France, and Australia are strongly represented, with other providers across Europe (west and east), and it also includes providers in Russia and the Far East. Nearly half the providers are from the core public administration reform Anglophone countries (United States, UK, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada).

However, providers not on the list can be selected as long as there is a strong case for justification. Once selected, strengths are considered on the basis on available expertise, but it is price as well as content that determine the final selection. *Guanxi* between providers and the various organizations and agencies is another important consideration and can make a key difference as to whether a particular provider is selected or not.¹

CONTENT OF UK-BASED MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

To understand the process of learning, the article now examines the content of programs delivered to Chinese civil

¹Interview with Program Director, Manchester Business School, University of Manchester, April 5, 2011.

servants in the UK. The only similar study is that of Sun and Ross (2009) who found that groups of civil servants undertook training “packages” that included company visits and work experience in addition to formal class-based seminars and teaching. In addition, packages invariably include some form of cultural visits. Normally, host institutions and training providers work with the relevant government department to design and deliver such packages based on the development strategy and job requirements following the selection process outlined above.

To illustrate learning on overseas training programs for Chinese civil servants, the case of an individual delegation will be briefly analyzed in which the author was involved in the delivery of the program. In autumn 2010, China sent a cohort from the Ministry of Finance to Manchester Business School as part of a “long-term training program” (i.e., over 3 months). The author provided lectures on Human Resource Management in the Public Sector, with a focus on the UK Civil Service. At the end of the sessions, a brief questionnaire was distributed to the participants on the topic of cross-national policy learning between Britain and China. There were 11 participants who could all write to a good standard of English. Below is a summary of the main responses:

- Prior to arriving in the UK, it appeared the participants were most eager to learn about the National Health Service (NHS), although this was not specifically addressed in the course content.
- There was no input by participants in terms of content, although there was agreement that to improve personal standards of English was a useful aim of the program
- Other than learning from the UK, the former Soviet Union was regarded as being the most popular overseas exemplar, marginally ahead of Germany and the United States.
- It was perceived that the Chinese government encouraged the training as a means to improve their English as well as to develop them as managers.
- Once on the program, the participants developed an interest in specific areas such as taxation, the NHS, and welfare policies.
- Conversely, taxation and the structure of government were also deemed to be the least interesting aspects.
- A broad range of policy areas were deemed to be transferable to China including re-sizing, taxation, welfare, HRM, and civil service management.
- Participants felt that the NHS and decentralization were the least “transferable” aspects to China
- It was felt that both Britain and China shared policy concerns including corruption, aging populations, and inefficiency.
- It was felt the UK could learn from China in terms of centralism, efficiency, and city management.

Apart from the very general aims of the program, the participants simply felt that they were “there to learn.” Many of the areas mentioned above emerged from the learning on the program, rather than being anticipated or planned. Thus, a mix of policies and approaches to management and organization were cited, many of which reflect the concerns of the Chinese government. It was clear the participants had no input into the design of the course yet this appeared to be unproblematic. Typically, the participants were comfortable with formal course delivery although there was some attempt at discussion and participation. Abstract concepts were generally not well received.

Although other countries were cited as exemplars, the participants simply felt that they were there to acquire knowledge of the UK public sector, and seemed content with location. Developing English language skills appeared to be as important as the content. In relation to the content, interest in specific areas emerged, such as taxation, but there were no prior assumptions made about the direction and scope of the course content. There were no surprises in relation to the potential for policy learning between China and the UK. Taxation and welfare policies in addition to HRM practice were considered to be potentially transferable whereas a national health service and organizational decentralization were unlikely to be transferred. It was clear that participants understood the limitations of policy learning between the different contexts of China and the UK.

The experience and opinions of the cohort are consistent with other groups of Chinese civil servants that the author has had personal involvement with. It is not clear how the learning will be brought back to the Ministry of Finance and acted upon, if at all. Course evaluations center on an assessment of lecturers, support staff, facilities, and hygiene factors rather than to establish if learning has occurred and how it will benefit the organization. Moreover, Branine (2005) points to the wider cultural challenge of delivering management based courses in Western countries. He concludes that learning is hampered due to the “difficulty in understanding Chinese managers” approach to learning and perception of management as a discipline” (p. 471). This is also a considerable challenge to the value of overseas development for the Chinese government.

OUTCOMES OF UK-BASED MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

The brief analysis above suggests that there are few outcomes for Chinese civil servants as a result of such programs. Standards of English are improved, and there is some addition to knowledge of public services and management in the UK, but otherwise this is an aspect that is difficult to assess. However, based on their analysis of cohorts of Chinese managers on overseas management development programs, Sun and Ross (2009, pp. 104–106) organize the impact of

those programs into four categories of benefits (talent, economic, social, and openness). Although their summary does not distinguish explicitly between respondents who received training in the UK and other Western countries, it could be argued that the Manchester group also experienced similar benefits. Their findings in each category are as follows:

- Talent benefit—that there are tangible changes in the “mindsets” of the managers as a result of exposure to Western ways of thinking leading to more professional management
- Economic benefit—training has benefited approaches to economic development and this includes improved use of English and learning from the mistakes made by Western governments
- Social benefit—respondents claimed a shift towards a more service-oriented public administration and greater transparency in public services, and,
- Openness benefit—greater dialogue between China and western countries including exchanges and a greater understanding of diversity

Sun and Ross (2009) also point out that some impacts were negative: “. . . that it is difficult to use their learning” (p. 105) due to important differences with Western management theory, which is consistent with Branine’s (2005) findings above. They also found that some former participants were “too idealistic and dogmatic in copying the “Western way”” which lead to conflict and tension once back in China. However, the benefits accrued by managers are consistent with the ideational approach, and that emulation is a form of policy learning.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR OVERSEAS LEARNING FROM THE UK TO CHINA

What is the long-term trend for Chinese management development in the UK? The program director for China in Manchester Business School’s Executive Education center has seen a decline in short-term programs (of 2–3 weeks duration). In his opinion, this is due to an increasingly critical public perception of the effectiveness and cost justification for such programs. However, long-term programs (typically 3–6 months) are stable as they are regarded as more viable. Such programs are now subject to greater budgetary scrutiny. Competition from non-university providers on price may also be a factor, exemplified by a growth in the UK of such providers in recent years. Another trend is that government organizations in China are being more specific about what they require in terms of course content in relation to addressing specific organizational problems, and are less inclined to send their administrators on general courses.

As Marchington and Wilkinson (2008, p. 373) note, proving the worth of formal management and development “is

not an easy matter.” Drawing upon European research, they note that for it to be effective, it needs to be integrated within a strategic approach supported by senior management. On that basis, there is no evidence to suggest how strategically people are managed in Chinese public sector organizations. Without it, Marchington and Wilkinson (2008, p. 374) add that it makes no difference to organizational performance. Hence, greater criticism of the benefits of overseas programs in China may eventually lead to dissatisfaction with such programs, particularly with the debate about the amount of public expenditure involved. Consequently, overseas courses may be more specifically tailored to the strategic needs of individual agencies and organizations, along with more careful targeting and selection of potential host countries.

Although it was noted earlier that the program providers on the list are dominated by Anglophone countries, there is a diverse range of countries also represented. Learning from overseas experience seems to lack an overall strategy or a discernible pattern but the dominance of US institutions (headed by Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government) and the UK on the provider list suggests these countries have features and qualities attractive to the Chinese government.

CONCLUSION

The benefits of overseas development programs appear to provide the kind of intangible benefits identified by Sun and Ross (2009). The ideational approach which is inherent in the content of learning from overseas development programs negates the rational basis of voluntary policy transfer activity when analyzing this particular process of policy learning. Rather, management development provides an alternative path for policy learning through the communication and exposure of alternative ideas and approaches. Thus, learning through the mechanism of overseas development is evolutionary—the implicit aim is to capture ideas from elsewhere to either learn from or to improve upon. Thus, the Chinese approach to overseas policy learning is more closely aligned with organizational learning related to management development. What is transferred from London to Beijing are ideas, attitudes, approaches, and knowledge rather than the highly specified contents of programs or reforms.

Thus, process-centered approaches (Evans, 2004) which emphasize the role of agents in the transfer process, appear to have no explanatory value when analyzing policy learning of this nature. To take this approach in relation to development would be to examine the role of management education and development providers. However, the specific content of the programs appears to be relatively unimportant—as Evans (2004, p. 13) notes, the process-centered approach assumes that state actors are “active agents seeking solutions to policy problems.” Rogers (1995) regards change

agents as influential and able to instill the need for change in their audience, in this case, program participants. As with overseas management development, the relationship is terminal; once the learning is delivered the client should become self-reliant. This appears not to be the case with the cohort mentioned previously.

Moreover, the process-centered approach derives its credibility from being able to “prove” that policy transfer has occurred, as in the case previously provided by Foster (2004), but the greater impact may ultimately come from the intangible benefits identified by Sun and Ross (2009), not the implementation of an adapted policy or program. Thus, the value of the ideational approach is that it provides a strong signal that policy learning is occurring between nations and reveals the direction of that policy learning. Policy transfer can only occur through policy learning.

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