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***“Learning from Abroad” and Policy Implementation:
Actors, Processes and Effects***

**The transfer of Careful Urban Renewal from Berlin to Yangzhou:
learning from abroad and its challenges**

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This paper, analysing the transfer of a model of urban renewal ("Careful Urban Renewal") to Yangzhou (China), proposes an overview of this case as well as some suggestions to enrich China studies. Focusing on the transfer process, on the actors involved, and on the outcomes, it shows, on one side, the importance of international cooperation in supporting local reforms. On the other, it shows that the impacts of transfer depended on the local specific combination of agency and structure. It also shows that the factors highlighted so far to explain diffusion and innovation in Chinese local governments are insufficient. To sharpen our tools of analysis it is therefore suggested following the recommendations of policy transfer researchers.

Key words: policy learning/policy transfer/policy innovation, urban renewal, China, local actors, formal and informal institutions

Introduction

This paper aims at extending our knowledge about transfers in contexts that have remained long time unexplored. Researches indeed traditionally focused on (Eastern) European countries (Marsh and Sharman 2009), and often on the national scale (McCann and Ward 2013). In this paper, the focus is shifted to the local scale in China, and it also addresses an emerging topic in the transfers literature: the diffusion of models of spatial planning (*cf.* Stead 2012). The study presented here looks in particular into the transfer of “Careful Urban Renewal” to Yangzhou, a case worthy of exploration. Developed in West Berlin in the years 1970s-1980s to cope with the decay of its inner quarters, Careful Urban Renewal was proposed in the early 2000s to Yangzhou, a third-tier city of the Chinese province of Jiangsu, as a solution to rehabilitate its old city. The transfer was initiated by the German cooperation agency GTZ (*Gesellschaft für technische Zusammenarbeit*), today GIZ (*Gesellschaft für internationale Zusammenarbeit*), and eventually produced successful results, as Yangzhou administration adopted the model. Many of the proposals made by GTZ were adapted and integrated into the local plans, policy documents, and regulations, making this case figure as an interesting exception if compared to other experiences of transfers of spatial planning concepts to Chinese cities. Actually, recent literature on this topic showed that these initiatives often conclude with a selective adoption of foreign proposals, resulting into failures or wrong adaptations of the ideas transferred (de Jong 2013). In Yangzhou, not only GTZ agents’ proposals were welcomed, but the city government also launched a process of policy learning and experimentation that led to a significant change of the city’s approach to urban renewal. It was also possible to notice, however, that this process was substantially halted with the change of city leadership, an aspect that this paper also addresses.

While answering to some of the questions raised by this panel (*e.g.* about the actors involved in the process of policy learning/transfer, the characteristics of the process, the effects of transfers, the factors impacting on the process of transfer, etc.), this paper develops in dialogue with the recent literature on policy diffusion and innovation in China, and in particular with the theory “of the pathways of diffusion” in Chinese local governments (Teets and Hurst 2014). This theory aims at explaining the processes of policy diffusion and policy innovation in Chinese local governments through disaggregating the Chinese state into its different levels and branches of power, and through identifying the sources of pressure and the incentives for local governments to experiment with new solutions, or to introduce new policies. While this

approach is very useful in the analysis of these phenomena, it is also possible to notice, however, that its exclusive attention to pressures and incentives overlooks other important factors impacting on diffusion and innovation processes. Actually, the authors of this theory themselves recognised that this approach does not pay attention to “non-rational” factors, such as “reputation, embeddedness in the community and social learning” (*ibid.*: 21), and that future researches “must also focus more on the role of learning in policy diffusion rather than relying simply on interest-based approaches” (*ibid.*: 22). This paper tries to follow this direction, stressing on the role of learning and on its challenges to explain the outcomes of the transfer of Careful Urban Renewal to Yangzhou. These elements were explored through a qualitative study based on 48 semi-structured interviews conducted in Yangzhou, Shanghai, Nanjing, Beijing and Berlin between 2013 and 2015,¹ as well as on the consultation of numerous policy documents and work reports. In this enquiry, the process of international cooperation as well as the local process of translation and of development of new policies were tracked. The enquiry in particular followed the recommendations made by policy transfers researchers to strengthen the analysis of these processes through combining classical analyses of policy change with sociological approaches, and paying attention to the important dimension of learning (*cf.* Colomb 2007). This approach actually revealed very fruitful in the identifications of the factors that impacted on the transfer and local adaptation of Careful Urban Renewal to Yangzhou.

Let research on “China experiments” draw from and contribute to our understanding of transfers and innovation

The themes of “China experiments”, and of local governance innovations and policy diffusion in China are topics of recent academic interest (*cf.* Teets 2015; Teets and Hurst 2014; Fewsmith 2013; Florini *et al.* 2012; Heilmann 2008). Scholars investigated into Chinese local governments’ attitude towards innovation and/or the adaptation of policies that diffuse from various levels of government, focusing in particular on the structure of incentives and sanctions that concern local officials. Teets and Hurst’s introductory chapter to their edited volume offers a rich treatment of the major arguments of this literature, hence this paper does not propose a further literature review. Rather, it makes some suggestions to improve our capacities to study these phenomena in China, drawing theoretical recommendations from the policy transfer literature as developed in the study of cases (often) concerning European countries. It

¹ This number does not include the repeated exchanges with core informants.

acknowledges that some analyses made in China studies, while on one side they surely point at certain specificities of the policy making process in China,² on the other they do not sufficiently dialogue with the already existing theorisations on policy innovation, policy change, policy diffusion, etc., that could enrich the understanding of the phenomena studied. This insufficient dialogue also tends to depict China as a special case, having its own incomparable patterns of diffusion, learning, and innovation. While the importance of acknowledging Chinese specificities remains undiscussed, it is also suggested that drawing from the existing literature on public policy analysis (which include transfer, diffusion, innovation, learning, change, *inter alia*) can contribute to have a better grasp of these phenomena in China.

An example will help support this argument. In their introductory chapter, Teets and Hurst (2014: 11) highlighted from their findings that “policy diffusion is inherently a political process with different nodes of power and interests that might ultimately allow a ‘bad’ idea to diffuse and ‘good’ ideas to stagnate”. They also concluded that “the existing adaptive policy process does not naturally allow optimal policies to diffuse” hence “stronger institutions for supporting policy innovation and capturing knowledge are needed” (*ibid.*). While these findings are not contestable, it is also important to underline that they do not represent features specific to China. Already in the 1970s, Chris Argyris (1977) wrote that learning in organisations is hindered by the extant “organisational learning system”, while Michel Crozier and Erhard Friedberg (1977) indicated that bureaucracies always attempt at hindering reform proposals, as they constitute a threat to existing interests and power structures. As a result, if reforms are introduced, they often represent a minimum common denominator, rather than optimal solutions (Crozier 1963).

Teets and Hurst (2014) also pointed at the main sources of pressure to which local governments in China are subjected when adopting innovations or adapting policies developed elsewhere, and highlighted the logics followed by local cadres. While their arguments are totally acceptable, it is also important to underline that their approach has a number of limits (recognised by the same authors). In particular, their focus on the role of political incentives and sanctions overlooked the weight of individual and shared values, the role of personal trajectories, the position individuals hold in the local government, etc., in short, the sociological characteristics of the actors involved in learning and innovation in local governments. Moreover, while they underlined that political constraints from top levels of government and/or

² For instance, it is possible to underline Sebastian Heilmann’s concepts of “experimentalism” and of “experimentations under hierarchy” (Heilmann and Perry 2011; Heilmann 2008).

local governance problems represent important sources of pressure for local officials to adopt certain policies, it is important to acknowledge that these factors can also play contradicting roles, and can create a situation of uncertainty in the process of learning and experimentation that may actually discourage officials. The impact of incentives and sanctions is not always straightforward, hence we shall pay attention to the strategies adopted by local actors in evaluating these incentives and the possibilities of really obtaining sanctions in case of non-compliance (*cf.* Mei and Pearson 2014), in skewing controls and possible sanctions from upper levels (*cf.* Zhou 2010), and in coping with divergent interests at local level (*cf.* Tang 2000).

Drawing from the existing literature on public policy analysis can support the analysis of these phenomena in China. For instance, in the case of policy transfer studies, literature suggests researchers to pay attention to the administrative capacities of local governments to adapt foreign knowledge as well as to introduce reforms (*cf.* Jacoby 2000). In this way, it will be possible to shed light on the impacts of transfers and/or innovation processes, and in particular on the instable results of such processes, a problem often underlined in China studies (*cf.* Teets 2015; Teets and Hurst 2014; Fewsmith 2013). Learning from similar phenomena in other countries, mutualising research questions and adopting the same theoretical and conceptual tools will help researchers “valorise both ‘common points’ and ‘differences’” in the study of these given phenomena (Rocca 2016: 3).³ This procedure also contributes to develop “an antidote to two typical pitfalls of academic literature focusing on China” (*ibid.*), namely the “cultural temptation”, which tends to consider phenomena happening in China incomparable to phenomena that happened elsewhere; and the developmentalist approaches, which consider that similar phenomena reproduce everywhere in virtue of the assumption that there exists a unique path of development for all societies. The phenomena happening in China, which may show similarities with phenomena in other countries, do derive neither from an unchanging or static tradition nor from a prefigured path that all countries have to follow. Rather, they are the product of specific historical trajectories, and as such, they establish through new or original configurations (*ibid.*).

Researches focusing on China could also contribute to the already existing literature and debates about policy diffusion, transfer, innovation and policy change (*cf.* Evans and Davies 2012; Peters *et al.* 2005; Hall and Taylor 1996). Starting from common concepts, a common

³ Author’s free translation from French.

vocabulary, and common questions can help researchers on one side to better grasp the characteristics of the phenomena under study and, on the other, contribute to the development of common theorisations (*cf.* Ostrom 2005). In this paper, findings are delivered in a way that tries to contribute to (policy) transfers and learning studies. In particular, in order to analyse the impacts of the transfer of Careful Urban Renewal to Yangzhou, this research relied on concepts commonly used in public policy analysis, such as “policy window” (Kingdon 1995 [1984]), the “success” of transfers (*cf.* Jacoby 2000), as well as on the insights of the sociology of organisations (*cf.* Crozier and Friedberg 1977). This choice was made following the recommendations made by researchers interested in policy transfers (*cf.* Colomb 2007). These recommendations not only helped identify some crucial factors impacting on the phenomenon under study, but also made possible to deliver observations through a common vocabulary, and to potentially contribute to enrich our knowledge about diffusion, learning, transfers and innovation processes.⁴

Yangzhou case: learning from Berlin’s experience and its challenges

The case of Yangzhou represents an interesting example to explore Chinese cities’ capacities to import new concepts of spatial planning (read also “eco-city” concepts), and more broadly to reform their practices of urban (re)development. As a matter of fact, starting from the reform and opening up period launched by Deng Xiaoping at the end of the 1970s, which officially introduced market-economy reforms in the country, Chinese cities have known tremendous transformations. These transformations not only significantly modified (and still modify) their urban landscapes, but also their relationships vis-à-vis the residing population and the environment. In particular, in the last 20 years Chinese cities have been marked by brutal practices of urban (re)development launched by the city governments. These practices had important impacts on cities’ spaces, on urban and rural residents, and on the environment (*cf.* Lin *et al.* 2015; Romano 2014; Whiting 2011; Hsing 2010). Entire neighbourhoods in city

⁴ Surely, this putting together concepts such as transfer, learning, diffusion and innovation can be criticized by some scholars, which would rather require making clear distinctions. However, I believe that distinguishing between them is not particularly useful. Literature underlined that in the processes of policy development and/or policy reform, policy makers experiment (Lindblom 1959), emulate (Jacoby 2000), and adapt knowledge coming from elsewhere (Stone 2012). These aspects can be well described by the notion of “transcoding” (Lascoumes 1996), policy-makers being involved, first of all, in a process of identification of the problem and of the “approach angle”; then they select viable options, which in turn require the collection of diffused information and finally their combination into a new, locally-embedded construction. If the solutions adopted may not be brand new in general terms, it may be probably new to the context adopting it and this is the acceptance I give to “policy innovation” (*cf.* Teets 2015).

centres were completely demolished, often without the agreement of their residents, and were replaced by new buildings targeting wealthier publics. The residents of these old neighbourhoods were displaced in city peripheries, often far away from their job places and/or from their networks. For many of these individuals, among which we shall also include the peasants torn from their land by city developers and city governments, displacement rhymed with the deprivation of their sole sources of income and/or social welfare. Moreover, the loss of arable land and the expansion of urban surfaces provoked by this rush to development is taking an enormous toll on the environment in China. These impacts represent today important problems for the country, waiting for a substantial reform of the policies of urban development of the central and local governments.

Yangzhou is not unfamiliar to these practices, although the redevelopment operations launched by the city government in the early 1980s did not completely demolish the city's historical neighbourhoods, today still partially conserved (Romano 2017). Rather, this city of Northern Jiangsu did not really witness the dramatic transformations that characterised its sister cities of Southern Jiangsu (Changzhou, Suzhou, Wuxi), destinations of domestic and foreign investments. The city "suffered" for this fact, and tried to catch up through adopting, *inter alia*, aggressive redevelopment strategies for its "old city" (*laocheng qu* – 老成区), which aimed at exploiting its touristic potential. These strategies were concocted under the direction of Yangzhou's former mayor Ji Jianye, in charge between 2001 and 2008 (first as mayor, then as party secretary)⁵, and directly appointed by the at-the-time chairman and leader of the Chinese Communist Party Jiang Zemin to boost Yangzhou economic growth. Native of Yangzhou, Jiang wished his *protégé* Ji to perform the same economic miracle he had been able to do in Kunshan, currently one of the most economically successful county-level cities in China. During the years of his mandate in Yangzhou, Ji Jianye did not disregard his duty. On the contrary, he worked zealously to help Yangzhou achieve its ambitious objective of becoming an important pole of the Yangzi delta. This zeal led to a spectacular expansion of the city: between 2000 and 2010, Yangzhou more than doubled its surface, passing from 55.3 square km to 127 square km (Liu

⁵ Chinese cities are led by two main party cadres, the mayor and the party secretary, which share decision-making power on separate issues, although it is often said that the party secretary is "the Number One" and the Mayor "the Number Two". Party secretaries have the power to nominate the heads of city departments, and this is one of the reason why they are considered the city's most important leaders. However, during their careers, mayors also have the chance to play the role of cities' Number One decision-makers, as at the end of their mandate they generally become cities' party secretaries.

Y. 2013: 10-11).⁶ In these same years, Ji also launched the realisation of important infrastructural projects connecting Yangzhou to China's main road and railway arteries, and in particular to the high-speed train network, very important for the future economic development of the city.

During his mandate, Ji Jianye also ordered the realisation of some controversial projects that led to the erasure of a part of Yangzhou's old neighbourhoods and the transformation of historical buildings into touristic and commercial attractions, with the consequent displacement of residents and loss of architectural heritage. It was precisely in an attempt at convincing him to revise his attitude towards the old city and his approach to planning that the German cooperation agency GTZ proposed the concept of Careful Urban Renewal (*behutsame Stadterneuerung*). This model was developed in West Berlin between the 1970s and 1980s, in opposition to the modernist approach to urban renewal adopted by the city government in the early 1960s, prone to the total demolition of the existing neighbourhoods and to their replacement with less dense but taller constructions and with roads facilitating car traffic (*cf.* Klemek 2011). Accompanied by an important change of paradigm in the theory and practice of urban planning (Bocquet 2010), Careful Urban Renewal advocated in favour of an "endogenous, socially and environmentally sustainable development of the city" based on "grassroots participation, urban containment, mixed uses, ecological preservation, limited gentrification and preservation of productive functions" (Colomb 2012: 106). Actually, between 2003 and 2008, GTZ made a series of proposals to Yangzhou government to improve the environmental performances of the city, suggesting the introduction of measures (*e.g.* on transportation, on waste management, on water depollution) that would have helped Yangzhou achieve its own plans to become an eco-city.⁷ Among these proposals, the careful, residents-participated, conservationist model of urban renewal was retained by the local authorities and experimented on the ground, albeit with a number of difficulties.

⁶ The city passed from the medium-size of 530 thousand inhabitants in early 2000s to 1 million 50 thousand inhabitants at the end of 2010 (Liu Y. 2013: 11). To provide some terms of comparison, we need only think, for example, that Paris' total surface is around 105,4 square km and its total population is around 2 million 220 thousands inhabitants.

⁷ Yangzhou was one of the cities selected by the at-the-time State Agency for Environmental Protection (SEPA), today Ministry for Environmental Protection (MEP), to become a pilot for eco-city development.

“It was very, very hard to do Careful Urban Renewal in Yangzhou”... although also possible

The title of this section quotes an interview extract with an ex-GTZ agent who participated to the early phases of the cooperation project conducted with Yangzhou. Many interviews with representatives of both GTZ and Yangzhou government actually indicated that misunderstandings and difficulties occurred on a daily basis, often rating out the presence of mismatching intentions and interests of the actors involved in the cooperation project. For this reason, the proposal of experimenting with Careful Urban Renewal did not really encounter the favour of the top officials serving in the local construction department. Their aim was rather that of redeveloping a number of sites of the old city through relocating residents, demolishing buildings, and constructing new commercial premises in fake antique style, following a practice well diffused in China (*cf.* Yue 2008; Li 2006). Former residential areas shall have changed their functions to become leisure areas for visitors, and in this way contribute to the development of tourism in the city. Therefore, surveying residents’ preferences and financial capacities, planning accordingly, and reiterating exchanges with residents to update plans and decide about neighbourhoods’ priorities did not represent an interesting planning approach for these officials.

However, GTZ’s proposals were not entirely rejected. A small number of officials and experts, mostly serving in the local Urban Planning Bureau, endorsed their ideas and were very willing to engage in discussions and experimentations. Some of these officials covered top positions in their departments, hence could offer GTZ agents the needed support to collect information about the old city and develop a planning proposal for its rehabilitation. A part of them also took part to an information trip to Germany, where they could attend courses concerning the country’s experience in urban renewal and exchange with local officials and experts. At the end of this trip, conducted in 2005, these officials and experts wrote a report to the mayor, suggesting the realisation of few pilot projects, the development of policies for the old city, and the establishment of a special interdepartmental office for the management of renewal operations and for the development of measures tackling the problems of the old city. These proposals obviously did not encounter the favour of the other top officials in the construction administration. As for the mayor, he did not entirely refuse them, but he was nevertheless not convinced to experiment with those ideas. His focus, we remember, was that of redeveloping the old city in a profitable way, which meant transforming its spaces into premises for

commercial and touristic uses. Revising this approach to favour a resident-led and resident-oriented renovation of the old city was not encompassed by his agenda and his (career) plan.

The situation met a favourable turning point with the arrival of a new mayor, Mrs Wang Yanwen. Mrs Wang showed keen to experiment with GTZ proposals, and she asked in exchange that GTZ agents help Yangzhou obtain the UN-Habitat Scroll of Honour Award, an important business card for the city to attract tourists and investors. From fieldwork interviews it emerged that this aspect actually played a crucial role in the successful evolution of the cooperation project. It was the likelihood of not obtaining the award if the government maintained its destructive redevelopment plans that convinced the recalcitrant officials and the party secretary Ji Jianye to accept the introduction of GTZ proposals in Yangzhou. As found in some memos of discussion and confirmed by interviews, one of the UN-Habitat agents invited to Yangzhou to learn about the local plans for the old city stated that he had “no more role to play” there if the government maintained its destructive renewal practices, irrespective of residents and of the built environment. These words sounded as a threat for Yangzhou officials and city leaders, for which international awards represent important “weapons” in the competition against other cities (*cf.* Li 2006). Since obtaining the award also depended on a change of approach to urban renewal, officials and city leaders accepted against their will GTZ proposals.

This event was followed by the selection of a site for experimentation. Residents were encouraged to participate to the planning of this site as well as to renovate their houses with the support of a subsidy program. An old warehouse was also reconstructed and provided of energy saving materials and equipment to function as a model for future renovations. These pilot projects were quite successful and, above all, met the positive acceptance of residents, which were asked for their first time ever whether they wanted to renovate their houses.⁸ Accompanying these pilot experiences and advocating for the diffusion of this model in the rehabilitation of the entire old city, GTZ also prepared an “Urban Upgrading Strategy” for Yangzhou, with the support of Cities Alliance. This document provided an overall concept for the horizon 2020, proposing to guide the establishment of policies and measures for urban renewal, as well as of dedicated plans and organisational arrangements for its implementation.

⁸ As discernible in literature on urban China, in general city governments decide their plans without consulting or informing residents, which in several cases are forced to move out without having been given any alternative (*cf.* Hsing 2010).

Published in 2007 and offered to local decision-makers and experts, this Urban Upgrading Strategy constituted the last chapter of GTZ collaboration with Yangzhou, which concluded in 2008.

What were the impacts of GTZ project in Yangzhou?

To believe that the adoption of new policies and plans in Yangzhou in the early 2010s resulted directly from the successful collaboration with GTZ and the positive results obtained with the cooperation project would be naïve. Indeed, this passage was neither straightforward nor it was expectable to happen. As pointed by Claire Colomb (2007: 350), albeit collaborations may produce successful results, we have to be conscious that these results may not translate into actual transfer, let alone change and policy impacts. Other conditions need to be satisfied, conditions that can be summarised, for instance, with the concept of “policy window” as established by John Kingdon (1995 [1984]). Precisely, without the development of a policy window, many of the ideas advocated by GTZ would have literally remained on paper. In the case of Yangzhou, the development of such policy window and the establishment of urban renewal as an important topic of the local policy agenda took place in a fashion that resembled very much the process theorised by Kingdon. Indeed, it has been possible to identify the presence of a problem stream, of a policy stream and of a political stream.

Namely, without the acknowledgment by a large part of the city officials that the model of urban renewal pursued that far cost too much for the city government and did not bring the expected returns on the investment, Yangzhou would have not treasured the lessons learnt with GTZ. Both policy documents issued in the early 2010s and fieldwork interviews pointed to the fact that due to the excessive costs of the state-led model of commercial redevelopment, it was fundamental to seek for less costly alternatives. Avoiding relocations and rather encouraging residents to have recourse to self-help to renovate their houses, hence sharing a part of the expenses with the government, was seen in the early 2010s as a more viable option to pursue the upgrading of the old city. Such change of approach would have also met residents’ favour and avoided protests or extreme manifestations of discontent, such as self-immolations, to which evicted residents also had recourse in the past to express their “disagreement” with the plans of the government.

As for the political and policy streams, it was possible to identify the presence of continuity between the actors that supported, since the beginning, GTZ project and the actors that introduced innovations in Yangzhou's renewal approach in the early 2010s. Continuity was also present between GTZ proposals and these novelties. Precisely, Mrs Wang, which had been recognised by both GTZ agents and the officials of Yangzhou administration as a person open to new proposals and keen to avoid conflicts with residents, rather supporting their claims to be heard when planning interventions in the old city, in the early 2010s took the post of city party secretary, the highest hierarchical position in the city government. Mrs Wang agreed for the creation of a special interdepartmental office that assumed responsibility for several tasks related to urban renewal, such as making policy research, preparing plans, organising bids, and issuing construction permissions. Such office, proposed by both GTZ agents and the local officials that supported GTZ project, shall have permitted the coordination of different departments in the realisation of renewal interventions, as well as the establishment of common responses to the problems affecting the old city. Mrs Wang decided to place at the head of this office the officials that supported GTZ project, and gave them free rein, or the "imperial sword" (*shangfang baojian* – 上方宝剑), to develop solutions for the old city. Thanks to this special position, these officials hence became the main "policy entrepreneurs" (*cf.* Kingdon 1995 [1984]) of the radical change of approach of urban renewal that took place in Yangzhou in the early 2010s.

For their double quality of experts (they mostly came from the fields of urban planning, architecture and heritage conservation) and of officials of the administration, it was possible to borrow Haroun Jamous' concept of "marginal intersecting actors" (*marginiaux sécants*) to describe the sociological characteristics of these policy entrepreneurs. Jamous developed this concept to characterise the authors of an important reform of the health sector in France in the 1960s. He described them as a small group of reformers who have common characteristics relative to the reform of the general system (*e.g.* shared values), often in contrast with the mainstream policies (Jamous 1967, cited in Crozier and Friedberg 1977: 351). He considered them "marginal" because they are hostile to the existing policies, but at the same time they have succeeded in their careers, covering posts of responsibility and in this way "intersecting", or having the chance to access, the main decision-makers. They are said "marginal intersecting" also because, compared to other actors in the system, they are relatively independent from the resources offered by the *status quo* (*ibid.*: 220) – *e.g.* they are insensitive to career achievements.

In the case of Yangzhou's policy entrepreneurs, they were represented by a very small number of officials (*cf.* Kingdon 1995 [1984]), and they came from different city departments related to urban renewal (*e.g.* the local Urban Planning Bureau, the Cultural Relics Bureau, etc.). Similarly to the reformers of the French health sector, they had disagreed for long time with Yangzhou's policy towards urban renewal, and shared common understandings about the reforms to adopt. For instance, they stressed on the necessity to conserve the existing built space, its scale, as well as its uses, and in this way also preserve the extant population. Thanks to GTZ project, some of these officials had the chance to advocate more strongly for a change of local approach to urban renewal, not only because they shared similar views with the experts of the foreign agency, hence their ideas found international legitimation, but also because GTZ advocated directly for them, hence limited the potential risks of damaging their political capital in case of failing pilot projects. Moreover, some of these officials also shared a particular habit of speaking frankly in the presence of city leaders and pointing at problems or wrongdoings. Colleagues considered them as *dezuiren* (得罪人), literally meaning "offending persons", while they did not particularly fear for the consequences of such behaviour on their careers.⁹

Thanks to their passionate work, Yangzhou's policy entrepreneurs, mostly operating in the newly-established interdepartmental office for the renewal of the old city, the "Old City Office" (*guchengban* – 古城办), launched a study and policy-making process which was richly fed (but not exclusively) by the proposals developed by GTZ agents. Namely, the policies, plans, and regulations issued in the early 2010s in Yangzhou, as well as the administrative and working procedures accompanying their implementation, shared many commonalities with the ideas proposed by GTZ, but also integrated formulations and approaches that had already been experimented and developed elsewhere (mostly in other Chinese cities). These novelties found their motivations in the local situation, in the local practices, as well as in the imperatives of the central government. For instance, with the issuing of new national regulations for the conservation of ancient towns and streets, which complemented the insufficient national law for the protection of heritage units (*Wenwu baohu fa* – 文物保护单位), city governments were required to issue the local versions of such regulations. Yangzhou accomplished this task in the early 2010s, issuing its own local regulations. These regulations also responded to GTZ

⁹ A common custom of officials in the administration is that of "not offending" or "not contradicting" (*bu dezui* – 不得罪) city leaders. Rather they tend to obey to their orders, even when obeisance requires acting regardless of laws and regulations. (Frequently) offending or contradicting a city leader, and in particular the party secretary, may have important consequences for officials' career, like being removed from one's post and being sent to another one of equal ranking but having less political importance.

proposal to develop local rules for the protection of the old city, and actually partially treasured the lessons learnt with GTZ, as some of their provisions were clearly inspired by the pilot projects conducted at the end of the 2000s with the German agency.

Novelties in Yangzhou also included local innovations developed during the realisation of concrete renewal projects. Actually, since local officials were lacking of sources of inspiration and of experience for the resolution of some specific problems in the old city, they launched a process of learning-by-doing through which they analysed the various problems encountered in the old city (*e.g.* what to do in case of uncertain property rights, given the complicated ownership structure of the old city, or what to do in case of residents with limited financial capacities to renovate), and experimented with original ideas. In this way, the local government tried to develop new solutions that would be improved and enriched with the experience, and that would constitute the foundations for new policies to be applied, at a later stage, to other renewal projects in the old city. Sometimes these measures were developed informally, officials having been obliged to adopt them in absence of national and local regulations addressing these specific problems, and were also developed in collaboration with residents on the basis of single projects.

Who or what is at the heart of the local process of transfer and innovation... and of its challenges?

With all evidence, establishing a clear hierarchy of influences or of sources of political pressure in the process that led to the definition of new practices, policies, regulations and plans in Yangzhou is complicated. Not only international, national and horizontal sources of inspiration (or pressure) mattered, but more importantly, there was the political willingness of various actors involved in the local process of reform. This aspect actually suggest not only to carefully follow the recommendation of breaking down “the state into different levels and branches of government” (Teets and Hurst 2014: 4), but also to further break down the single level or branch of government and look at its actors and their interactions with other actors and institutions. This procedure will also help discover a series of other important factors impacting on the local processes of policy reform, and will be fruitful to understand the challenges faced by these same processes. For instance, in Yangzhou, it was possible to observe that although some departments concerned with old city renewal shared with the Old City Office the idea of preserving the existing buildings rather than demolishing them and constructing new ones, they

did not share equally similar ideas as for the approaches to be adopted. Indeed, while the Old City Office wished to promote conservation with the participation of local residents, other departments preferred to keep buildings without their residents, and disposing of these buildings for commercial and touristic purposes. Another example is represented by the process that led to the establishment of the Old City Office. The original idea of Yangzhou's policy entrepreneurs was that of creating a special office independent from other departments, but combining together their different competences and powers. In this way, it would have been possible to centralise the decisions in one office and give it the capacities to deal with the different problems of the old city, which were not exclusively technical. This proposal met the opposition of many departments, which were not ready to concede a part of their powers, and in this way give up certain privileges related to those powers. As a result, the Old City Office was established as a special office under the control of a department, and was given powers and personnel only *ad hoc* for single projects. The presence of different points of view in Yangzhou administration hence represented one of the main challenging factors of the local process of learning, elaboration of the lessons learnt with GTZ, and introduction of reforms, which consequently obliged Yangzhou's policy entrepreneurs to make compromises on many points, if not to drop certain policy proposals.

These examples in particular suggest paying attention to the actors involved in the local process of policy learning and policy reform (not only city leaders), and to the structures in which these actors interact, looking into the multiple factors that impact on their innovative/reformative behaviours. Such factors cannot be entirely identified with the incentives of the central government, the presence of local problems, the presence of bureaucratic competition, and the diffusion of policy models. Actually, literature on urban China pointed several times at the lack of coordination of central and local policies concerning urban (re)development, at the weak implementation of policies established by the central level, and at the large discretion of city governments in urban (re)development, a situation configuring the Chinese government as a *de facto* federalism (*cf.* Zheng 2006). Therefore, other factors need to be considered, and they can be identified through focusing on the sociological characteristics of the actors involved in the local learning and reform process (*e.g.* their position in the administration, their personal trajectories, including education and work experience, their personal beliefs, the importance given to career advancements, their interests etc.), as well as on the institutional settings or particular context in which they operate.

On the need to engage in a more in-depth analysis of agency and structure interactions: evidence from the fieldwork

It is precisely in the relationship between agency and structure and in the characteristics of both that it was possible to identify a series of core factors that impacted on Yangzhou's capacities to introduce reforms, innovate, and make of learning and innovation constant features of its approach to city redevelopment. In particular, the operation of further breaking down the state up to the individual level in the case of Yangzhou showed that the imperatives of the central government played, sometimes, contradicting roles, while the presence of different power branches, identifiable with the various departments composing the city administration, also hindered the local process of learning and innovation. It also showed that innovative behaviours depend very much on actors' personal characteristics, and on their interaction with the structure of constraints in which they operate, hence on their willingness and capacities to push for a reform of the *status quo* given the characteristics of their organisational learning system.

As for the aspect of agency, we have seen already that the officials at the heart of the transformation of Yangzhou's urban renewal policy had disagreed for long time with the approach adopted by the city government, which led, according to them, to important losses for both Yangzhou residents and for the city in general. Their own personal experience and individual characteristics (which include, *inter alia*, their education, their career path, their personal networks, their personal attachment and commitment to the old city, their attitude vis-à-vis their superiors and respect of customs, their frustration with bureaucratic logics, etc.) often prompted them to play an active role in policy-making, for instance through criticising the city leadership when it commanded the realisation of destructive projects, or through profiting of the policy opportunity offered by the presence of an open-minded city leader to steer urban renewal in Yangzhou towards a more conservationist approach.¹⁰ The presence of these actors in Yangzhou functioned as a real fertile ground for the introduction of new ideas in the local urban renewal policies as well as a powerhouse for the concretisation of these ideas into reforms, which were represented by new planning documents or modifications to existing plans, by new regulations, by new administrative practices, by the adoption of consultative practices with residents and with experts, etc. These reforms not only produced new policy documents, but also (more importantly) impacted on the practices of the administration towards urban renewal.

¹⁰ As pointed by a local official, the presence of a receptive city leader is fundamental in the development and implementation of new policies, especially because mayors and party secretaries provide political support, personnel and financial capacities to innovating officials.

However, as mentioned earlier, their impact on the local process of learning and reform has to be confronted with the context in which they operated, hence with the structures or the local institutions, which also include the commands of the central government. On this specific aspect, the case of Yangzhou showed that the central-local interaction was less straightforward than imagined, central directives not always having a direct impact on the considerations of local officials while, sometimes, also hindering local innovations or blocking action. For instance, interviews indicated that the regulations established by national ministries are sometimes contradictory, as they are established by different offices within the same ministries. This situation caused much frustration to local officials, with the final result that they avoided developing more ambitious policies at the local level. Interviews also indicated that national laws and regulations are sometimes too restrictive and conservative, blocking the possibility to develop innovative measures to promote the sustainable conservation of the old city, the main objective of the reforms promoted by Yangzhou's policy entrepreneurs.¹¹ In case of conflicts with national laws and regulations, officials avoided including certain provisions in the local policy documents, but applied them informally to promote the realisation of specific projects.

The aspect of informality just mentioned also suggests that, when we analyse the behaviour of local governments in China and we take into consideration the structures or institutions within which actors operate, it is very important not to exclusively dwell on official policy documents, laws and regulations, but also to pay careful attention to informal practices (*cf.* Zhou *et al.* 2012; Zhou 2010; *cf.* also, for other contexts, Delpeuch and Vassileva 2010). Actually, fieldwork observations showed that informal rules represent fundamental "laws" for officials working in bureaucratic organizations. Interviews indicated that complying with informal rules is deemed more important than complying with formal ones, in particular in the trade-off between existing laws/regulations and the orders of the city leaders. In this case, many officials prefer to obey orders and act regardless of laws and regulations, fearing that disobeying their leaders will have an impact on their career. This aspect was reported as one of the reasons why, today, many of the policies and regulations introduced in the early 2010s in Yangzhou to reform the local

¹¹ "Careful urban renewal" was actually "translated" in Yangzhou as "old city sustainable conservation" (*kechixu gucheng baohu* – 可持续古城保护), an expression that reflected the willingness of the local policy entrepreneurs to establish a series of policies and a process that would have harnessed Yangzhou's local resources in the renovation and rehabilitation of the old city. In this perspective, urban renewal and conservation shall have relied on local residents and on local companies, investing in the renewal of the old city, improving its environment, and giving it the opportunity to resurge economically and produce, in this way, the resources for its further rehabilitation and maintenance.

practices of urban renewal are disregarded, as the new city leaders are less interested than the previous ones in the careful renewal of the old city.

Of course, officials can also refuse to obey, or try to discuss with the city leadership on the basis of their professional knowledge or of the existing regulations, an aspect that explains why it is also not possible to add the word “end” to this story. Indeed, albeit the new city leadership did not endorse the policies adopted by their predecessors, but rather wished to return to past practices and promote “less careful” urban redevelopment projects, both officials’ advocacy and residents’ disagreement with the proposals of the city leadership make it difficult to point at any decisive outcome of the transfer. Always concerning officials’ (complex) relationships with formal and informal rules, and the weight of the commands of the central government, it was also possible to notice that in certain cases officials stopped collaborating in local experiments because they feared the controls of upper levels of government, in particular after the current central leadership launched the imperative of developing a “society of rule of law” (*fazhi shehui* – 法治社会). Consequently, if in the past they accepted to collaborate in the development of informal arrangements when laws and regulations were silent about specific problems, after the introduction of this imperative some officials tended to refuse to experiment with informal arrangements, and hide behind special regulations blocking any further attempt at experimentation.¹²

The different factors listed here indicate, once more, that there is no way to clearly discern upon which factors officials decide to act, as their decisions to abide to laws or obey orders, or to make policy proposals or avoid engagement in policy-making, also depend on their individual characteristics, and in particular on the way in which they react towards the structure of constraints. This aspect actually recalls that the “classic” sociology of organisation, as developed in the 1970s, already explored these specificities in bureaucrats’ behaviour and can help in the interpretation of the observed phenomena. For instance, Crozier and Friedberg (1977: 119) indicated that the personal capacities and characteristics of officials and the structure of the rules that they follow can vary more or less considerably. We can find actors more willing to embrace risks, others more aggressive and entrepreneurial, while others are more defensive.¹³

¹² As also evidenced by Glaessner (1986) in the case of Eastern Germany, officials are caught in a “mentality of secondary guarantee”, trying to guarantee themselves from the control of upper government levels while they avoid solving problems through hiding behind new instructions and the rules of superior levels of government.

¹³ However, in general, bureaucracies are characterised by dependency and passive attitude (Crozier and Friedberg 1977: 267), as entrepreneurship in policy-making can constitute a very risky activity (*ibid.*: 268), and not only in

Fieldwork in Yangzhou confirmed for a large part these theoretical arguments, while suggesting tapping from these rich resources to enhance our capacities to understand phenomena of transfers, learning and innovation, may they concern bureaucracies in China or in other countries. In general, these findings suggest that both the complexities of agency and structure and the different relationships maintained by these two types of factors shall represent the core of our analysis, going beyond the simple look at the weight of structures (namely incentives, sanctions, and hierarchy) over actors' decisions. Actors can shape structures, interact with them, sometimes avoid them or weigh up the costs of compliance versus entrepreneurship. Actors, which include city leaders and city officials, can be also motivated by reasons which do not exactly match with career perspectives; rather, as also observed in Yangzhou, they can represent more collective interests which do not find protection in the extant policies, laws and regulations (*cf.* Badie 1992). Therefore, their interests and motivations in introducing innovations or reforming local policies may be more complex than the simple pursuit of career achievements.

Conclusion

This article, introducing the transfer and adaptation of Careful Urban Renewal to Yangzhou, presented a short analysis of this case while showing the benefits of enriching analyses focusing on China with the recommendations made by policy transfer scholars. In particular, their suggestion to adopt a mixed approach in the analysis of transfers, relying on the classical public policy analysis and on the sociology of organisations, helped shedding light on the various and sometimes contradictory forces impacting on Yangzhou's local process of transfers and innovation, as well as on the outcomes of this process, in turn enriching our knowledge about these phenomena, may they concern Chinese cities or other localities. Specifically, in the case of Yangzhou, it was possible to observe and confirm that the success of transfers depends very much on the presence of "endogenous forces of mutation" (Stone 2012), hence on individuals in favour of a reform of local policies and practices. It was also possible to notice that in Yangzhou these individuals were represented by officials belonging to the local administration, as planning and policy-making in China is still an activity very much owned by the government (Li 2006).

authoritarian contexts. Hence, the best strategy that individuals can follow is to do the least possible, making of apathy and lack of participation two rational strategies in the hands of bureaucrats (*ibid.*). By this token, bureaucrats in general decide to move when they obtain green light from their superiors.

These recommendations also helped discern the important roles played by agency, structure, and by their mutual interactions, and pay attention to individuals' sociological characteristics when identifying the factors that motivate the presence of transfer, innovation, and policy change in Chinese local governments. They also permitted the identification of the logics of day-to-day policy making, of local translations and adaptations, as well as of the limits that are imposed to these activities. In Yangzhou, these logics were (expectedly) ascribable to both the political willingness of local officials (their intentions, their interests, their motivations), as well as to their capacities to introduce such reforms in relation to the organisational learning system in which they operated. This system in turn played both as a facilitator and hindrance to learning. In particular, the strong relevance of informal rules over formal ones turned the outcomes of the transfer of Careful Urban Renewal to Yangzhou into instable policies and practices, the application of which strongly depends, today, on the political willingness of the city leadership, on the courage of local officials to advocate for their application, on the weight of residents' protests, as well as on the evolution of national policies.

The relevance of informal rules also impacted on the quality of these same outcomes, which resulted being the product of several compromises with diverging interests protected by these same informal rules (*e.g.* the informal rule of not meddling into each other's affair). Consequently, the novelties introduced in Yangzhou presented some substantial differences with the initial ideas of their policy entrepreneurs and with the proposals made by GTZ. Outcomes were also the result of compromises with existing laws and regulations, which sometimes constituted real hindrances to the local process of innovation. In particular, contradicting commands from the central government showed that their impact on local processes of reform and innovation may be counterproductive. Therefore, the presence of incentives, sanctions, bureaucratic and inter-city competition, as well as the presence of local need cannot build up alone a complete set of causal mechanisms to explain the presence of policy innovation and policy diffusion in China. A more complete account, although far from being exhaustive, would also take into account the role played by various actors (beyond city leaders), which do not only respond to exogenous sources of pressure or incentives, but also to endogenous ones (*e.g.* their personal beliefs, their education/learning experiences, etc.), and the way in which these actors interact with the existing structures, the impacts of which may be very different from what we may expect.

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