

The Politics of Diffusion of River Chief System in China

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Introduction

River Chief System (RCS) is a local policy initiative in Changxing County of Zhejiang province to tackle severe blue algae pollution in 2006 in Taihu river basin, where Changxing County is located upstream. In 2008, RCS was first officially proposed in a local policy paper of Changxing County “Clear Water in Lake: a Two-Year Action Program”, and “Clear Water in Lake Action” leading group and office were set up (People's Daily Online 2008). The River Chiefs are the key leaders of the Party and government at provincial, municipal, county, township and village levels, who take charge of rivers governance and supervision of river chiefs at lower levels with their jurisdiction and adopt novel governance approaches, in order to reduce water pollution and protect water environment. RCS was firstly promoted nationwide by the General Offices of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the State Council in the official document “Opinions on the Comprehensive Implementation of the RCS” in December 2016. Related discussions are concerned with the topics: policy remaking issue in policy transfer of RCS (Xiong 2019; Xiong and Zhou 2017), RCS policy implementation and diffusion path (Wang and Pang 2018), success of political mobilization in RCS (Hao and Wan 2019), political hierarchy and transboundary water governance (Chien and Hong 2018), and river management related institution and legislation concerns (Yang, Lu, and Ran 2016).

Policy diffusion is generally termed by political scientists in a broad sense referring policy dissemination. Policy diffusion research is emphasized as the investigation of “why this happen and why governments sometimes make the same (or very similar) decisions one after another in a temporal sequence” (Knoblauch, Mederake, and Stein 2018, 2). However, diffusion and transfer are often used synonymously in policy studies. It is remarked that “despite their different methodological approaches, generally identify four major mechanisms, learning, competition, coercion and mimicry, although these mechanisms receive differing degree of attention in the diffusion and transfer

literatures” (Marsh and Sharman 2009, 271). Along the same lines, mechanisms encouraging policy diffusion are top-down coercion, bottom-up persuasion and horizontal learning, mimicry and competition (Dobbin, Simmons, and Garrett 2007; Shipan and Volden 2008). Marsh and Sharman (2009) assert the complimentary nature of policy transfer and policy diffusion in literature and raise five key issues of understanding policy diffusion and policy transfer. Among these, they point out that analytical focus of policy diffusion and transfer are mechanisms in diffusion and transfer, in particular, the interactions and involving of mechanisms over time. In terms of local policy innovation and dissemination, there is considerable amount of literature examining local policy innovation and patterns and mechanisms of policy diffusion. Local policy innovation is of increasing importance for local governance, and socially optimal policies diffuse in a technocratic process. The relationship between policy innovation and political opportunities are emphasized (Berry and Berry 1992; Berry and Berry 1994).

Zhang and Zhu (2019) suggest noticing the gaps in studying policy diffusion theory in authoritarian context and posit “China is an excellent case for testing the generalizability of policy diffusion theory because China has a setting with a developing economy, political authoritarianism, and a Confusion culture that is radically different from typical western countries” (Zhang and Zhu 2019, 496). In China, policy diffusion is argued as a political process rather than a technocratic one and local officials are policy entrepreneurs in a political process (Teets 2016). The framework of policy entrepreneur is explored in the Chinese context, demonstrating the impact of policy actors’ acuity, problem definition and leading by example on policy outcomes in China (Hammond 2013). With advanced approach of quantitative analysis, Zhang and Zhu (2019, 509) demonstrates that “learning and imitation effects can significantly and consistently accelerate the process of innovation diffusion among provincial governments...and top-down effects can significant increase the probability of adopting new economic policy tools in China”. In addition, they points out the critical role of

policy environment in a transitioning country as in China owing to highly uncertain and frequently changing, suggesting that “local leaders need to be aware of various resources and opportunities to adopt an appropriate innovation” (Zhang and Zhu 2019, 510).

Heilmann (2008) points out the imperative role of decentralised experimentation in China’s distinctive policy process remaining the prerogative of the Party leadership. This type of pilot programs, also known as point-to-surface approach, discover innovative policy instruments rather than defining policy objectives, where central policy makers encourage local officials to innovative ways of solving local problems and then experience from the pilot programs are absorbed into national policy formulation. Heilmann’s argument of experimentation under hierarchy combines “decentralised experimentation with ad hoc central interference, resulting in the selective integration of local experiences into national policy-making, that is the key to understanding China’s policy process” (Heilmann 2008, 29). Furthermore, “the experiment under the shadow of hierarchy” framework is proposed to understand local experiments are functioned as corrective mechanisms to making and remaking the Chinese national innovation policy (Heilmann, Shih, and Hofem 2013). According to the above discussion, political ideology, hierarchical authorities and local officials’ pursuit of career promotion account for China’s distinctive mode of policy experimentation and selective dissemination under hierarchy. Optimal local policy innovations and experiments in many occasions are selectively adopted or as corrective mechanism or called off in the diffusion process. This also illuminates how political resilience and adaptive governance is achieved in China (Heilmann 2018).

This study of the development of RCS in China aims to explore: first, how multiple diffusion mechanisms interact and promote effective policy adoption to match both local needs and central preferences in the Chinese ‘politics of diffusion’ mode; and second, whether there are modifications of mechanisms of diffusion in China’s local

context. RCS's success in river governance and policy diffusion is not only owing to interaction of multiple diffusion mechanisms in the Chinese 'politics of diffusion' mode, but also imperative mechanisms are created between top-down party and government leadership and bottom-up public interests. It enhances the mutual responsiveness to water governance policy and the collective action between local governments and the public to manage river environment together in specific local policy environment. The following analysis focuses on 1) interactions of multi-dimensional diffusion mechanisms of RCS policy development and 2) the mechanisms that underpins the success of RCS diffusion to match local needs and central preferences in the Chinese 'politics of diffusion' mode within specific local policy environment.

In terms of method in policy diffusion research, Marsh and Sharman comment on the advantage and inadequacy of both large-N and small-N studies: "large-N comparative studies allow generalizations, but many would argue that they don't permit sufficient consideration of the cultural differences, etc. among cases. In contrast, small-N studies allow a more nuanced analysis, but the results are not generalizable" (Marsh and Sharman 2009, 270). Zhang and Zhu's study advances the understanding of multiple diffusion mechanisms in China by the directed dyadic event history analysis, providing evidence that multiple diffusion mechanisms can coexist in China (Zhang and Zhu 2019). This research considers case study method as an appropriate approach to understand policy diffusion of RCS in China. Research data was collected from fieldworks in Zhejiang and Anhui provinces to understand RCS policy diffusion from 2017 to 2020, including local governmental documents, speeches and planning statements; interviews with formal river leaders at provincial, city, county, town and village levels and informal river leaders.

Interaction of RCS Diffusion Mechanisms

Changxing County is in the northwest of Huzhou city in Zhejiang province. In 2007 the

outbreak of blue algae in Taihu Lake lead to a drinking water crisis. As early as February 2008, in the revision of “Water Pollution Prevention and Control Law”, “target responsibility” and “assessment and evaluation” are underlined for local governments and the party leaders in local water environment governance (Liu 2017). Despite the fact that responsibilities of local officials are written in water environment related laws and regulations, implementation in the real context is lagged behind. On this basis, in 2008 RCS was initiated in the Zhejiang and Jiangsu, where local rivers were in server water pollution. Coercion, learning, competition and mimicry are considered as the key mechanisms encouraging policy diffusion (Dobbin, Simmons, and Garrett 2007). In China, local policy innovation and diffusion are posited as experimentation under hierarchy system, where cadre evaluation system works as a stimulus to policy diffusion (Heilmann 2008; Teets 2016; Heilmann 2018). In the study of diffusion of contracting out elder care in China, Teets (2016) examines three dimensions of diffusion mechanisms which are top-down, bottom-up and horizontal mechanisms, and presents the argument of politics of diffusion in a top-down manner. These further the understanding of key diffusion mechanisms in the Chinese hierarchy context. However, these studies of policy diffusion focus on Chinese hierarchical diffusion mechanisms rather than interaction of mechanisms to produce the success or failure of diffusion in China or other developing countries. Concerning how multiple diffusion mechanisms interact and promote effective RCS policy adoption and development to match both local needs and central preferences, our following analysis examines interactions of multi-dimensional diffusion mechanisms of RCS policy development.

Changxing County has a total of 547 rivers, of which 314 cross-town rivers and 86 rivers are taken as administrative lines between townships and villages. Before RCS, the plans, standards and responsibilities of governance between villages and towns are not clear, resulting in the difficulties of implementing what is written in the “Water Pollution Prevention and Control Law”. In our fieldwork, a county official in Changxing commented “*protecting rivers and lakes is a matter for the well-being of*

our local people. In 2003, our mayor took the lead in setting up RCS for several key rivers. The government officials and party leaders from the provincial level to village level are responsible in river governance at local levels. River chiefs are at provincial, municipal, county, town and village levels”. Why is it in 2003? Why did the mayor of Huzhou city take the lead?

Zhejiang province was one of the leading province in economic development in China. In spite of rapid economic and social development, environment issues became the major concern for the provincial leaders. Local government become the most important institutional entities in local environmental regulations (Skinner, Joseph, and Kuhn 2003). Modern textile is one of the main industrial sector in Changxing County, and the waste water of textile manufacturing was the key source of water pollution. In June 2003, Zhejiang province launched a “Thousand Village Demonstration and Rectification Project” under the leadership of Xi Jinping, who was the Party Secretary of Zhejiang Province. This project focuses on the improvement of the environment in rural production, rural life and rural ecology, in order to improve the rural ecological environment, the quality of farmers’ life, and to balance urban and rural development (Xinhua Net 2018). Xi Jinping’s concern of environment and determination of sustainable development are highlighted in his provincial leadership in Zhejiang (Huan 2019). In line with this project, RCS was initiated in Changxing county of Huzhou city in 2003. In our fieldwork, a meeting with Huzhou RCS Office was further explored the RCS policy initiative and innovation in Huzhou. The RCS Office officials made the comment, underlining the imperative role of good idea of political development in the initiative of RCS:

“We used to give the priority of economic development and the awareness of water protection was low. We did not realise the importance of water environment, until we read newspapers and governmental documents, also watches news on TV, knowing Xi’s enormous effort and rounds and rounds fieldworks in villages in our province to

emphasize the importance of environment and sustainable development. Xi's political development idea gives us a good lesson. We then had several meetings to discuss about how to tackle local river pollutions in our city".

Research interviews are also conducted with local residents in Changxing County. In the local people's opinion, the leadership demonstration is critical for the birth of various chiefs and diffusion of chief models. We are informed that in Changxing County there have been not only river chiefs but also road chiefs since 2003: *"we think the chief policy is very useful. River chiefs and road chiefs disseminate very quick from our county to other places in Zhejiang. These chiefs manage rivers and roads to keep our rivers and roads clean...In the past, no one cares about environment. The chiefs have the ability to do this and they set good examples for us."*

When we were having a meeting in Huzhou RCS Office, we saw a statue of *Yu the Great*, who is the tamer of the flood and the founder of Xia dynasty. For 13 years, he dedicated himself to water governance project without coming home. River chiefs in Changxing county often underlined the importance of leadership demonstration in water governance, from Yu the Great to Xi's determination and leadership in Zhejiang. They believe that leadership demonstration reflects the Yu the Great's spirit, courage and determination embedded in Chinese traditional culture, not only being a water tamer but also being a political leader. This echoes with the argument that Xi's thought on eco-civilization is developed from traditional Chinese Culture (Huan 2019). It exerts profound impact on local and state governance in China and provides the favorable conditions of disseminating good examples, such as political demonstration and political power related resources mobilization (Hao 2017). Moreover, leadership demonstration also acts as a trigger for horizontal mimicry and competition.

Literature on policy diffusion in China casts light on top-down coercion mechanisms. In fact, for RCS coercion mechanisms do not play critical role in RCS diffusion. RCS

is a local imitative in Changxing County, in line with the 2003 “Thousand Village Demonstration and Rectification Project” in Zhejiang under the strong political leadership of Xi Jinping, who was the Party Secretary of Zhejiang Province. Top-down diffusion of RCS is from Changxing county to its township and village levels. The total length of rivers in Changxing county is 1659 kilometers, which has been fully managed under RCS. By 2013, Changxing County Committee and County Government have established county, township, village, and village group four levels of RCS management model, with 547 river chiefs coordinating, inspecting and supervising at various levels of rivers. At the beginning of 2014, the provincial Party Committee and the provincial Government formally established the "Five Water Co-Governance" leadership group, headed by the provincial party secretary and governor, and six deputy provincial leaders served as deputy leaders, overall and coordinated the work of water management. The leadership group office drew more than 40 ‘backbones’ with centralised operation and eight aspects of support concerning the need of planning, funding, supervision, assessment, science and technology support, regulations and executing command. In addition, 30 inspection groups were set up in the provincial government to conduct in-depth inspection of implementation of water management. Responsibilities of river chiefs are shouldered at different administration levels (Xu and Lu 2019).

Meanwhile, horizontal diffusion of RCS goes from Changxing County to other counties in Huzhou city and cities along the Taihu Basin in China. As early as in June 2008, Changxing’s neighbor Jiangsu province issued the “Notice of the General Office of the People's Government of Jiangsu Province on the Implementation of the Dual River Chief System in the Main Rivers into Taihu Lake”. The Jiangsu Provincial People's Government decided to implement innovative "Dual RCS" for 15 rivers into the Taihu Lake. Two types of river chiefs are defined: provincial river chiefs and local river chiefs. Provincial river chiefs are led by the provincial government, who are from the provincial Taihu Water Pollution Prevention and Control Committee and the provincial

Bureaus. Local river chiefs are city, county and district People's Government officials. The main responsibility of river chiefs in Zhejiang and Jiangsu are in common, organizing, leading and planning the implementation of water environment management, coordinating the resolution of disputes and problems at work, taking responsibilities of supervising and inspecting, as well as looking after project planning and funding issues (Zhu 2017).

Supervision is one of rules of institutional design to ensure successful self-governance in common pool resources management (Ostrom 1990). Public supervision is one of crucial mechanisms to make RCS operate and diffuse effectively from Changxing to Zhejiang and neighboring local areas. It provides an effective channel to respond local governance problems (Hao 2019). Furthermore, we argue that governing networks based on public supervision and participation in process RCS development provide major impetus for bottom-up diffusion of RCS. Since 2003 the initiative of RCS in Changxing, public participation has become more and more active with diversified forms and characteristics. On the volunteering basis, there are groups of women river chiefs, little young pioneer river chiefs, youth river chiefs, elder river chiefs. In addition to the groups of volunteering river chiefs, there are active local people who are informally participating in looking after local rivers. Local water governing networks also sees the significant role of informal but solidary groups in public goods provision (Tsai 2007a).

During our fieldwork, we are told by the local volunteers and groups of volunteering river chiefs that *“following the RCS billboards, we keep an eye not only on what are in rivers but also the job by the river chiefs whose names, responsibilities, phone numbers and their bosses’ numbers are displayed on the billboards. When there are problems, we just make phone calls to raise problems...We propose potential solutions. Our volunteering river chiefs are useful assistants to the official river chiefs to identify local problems and know local people’s need in the local river governance.”*

It is argued that local need incentivizes policy experimentation. Local officials' behavior can be explained by local social networks and policy innovation is influenced by how local officials respond to local problems, being held accountable for local water environment (Tsai 2007b; Teets 2016). In the case of RCS, river chiefs are under the supervision and receiving persuasion from local water governing networks that is composed of active volunteering river chiefs and related groups in Changxing. Vertically, various forms public participation in the governing networks promote the bottom-up diffusion of informal river chiefs groups and informal institutions in water governance through supervision and persuasion. This further incentivizes RCS policy experimentation and effective horizontal diffusion.

Effective horizontal diffusion mechanisms are explained by learning, mimicry and competition (Marsh and Evans 2012; Teets 2016; Zhang and Zhu 2019). Learning among provinces is a main approach for RCS diffusion between Zhejiang and Jiangsu provinces. Two adjacent provinces facing the common challenge of Taihu Lake pollution are closely interactive in mutual learning, mimicry and competition before issuing the official document "Opinions on promoting the RCS" by the General Offices of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the State Council in December 2016. In the case of RCS diffusion, horizontal diffusion mechanisms are mainly important to cities and provinces affected by the pollution in Taihu Basin, such as Zhejiang, Jiangsu, Shanghai, Fujian, and south of Anhui. Local officials in Changxing told us *"other provinces learn RCS from us...we felt the pressure from Jiangsu and Shanghai in the competition of water governance. We think all kinds of best solutions to improve our RCS work, and also invest in high technology, such as robotic equipment for cleaning water pipes and smart phone device system to track river chiefs' patrol along and with boats on rivers"*.

In 2017 and 2018, we conducted fieldworks in S county of Anhui province who is

adjacent to Zhejiang province along the Taihu Basin. In Anhui, RCS is basically learned and adopted in S county, and the diffusion does not reach to the provincial level. We were informed that Taihu Basin in Anhui only a small section in S county and pollution is comparatively low there owing to no industrial pollution in south of Anhui. Interestingly, we were also informed by the county river chief that *“our county is relatively poor compared with our neighbor cities in Zhejiang and Jiangsu. We have to be strategic when adopt a policy according to our real situation. It is not sensible to copy everything from them. We learn from their advanced experience but selectively... We listen to the central command. Our president promotes ‘Green Water and Green Mountain’ last year. We speed up to learn and copy the experience from Zhejiang, making river chiefs billboards and holding river chiefs meetings more frequently...As a matter of fact, water quality in our country is much better than Zhejiang. Considering the economic resources and pollution conditions, so we selectively use some of good experience from other provinces”*.

In the horizontal diffusion, diffusion mechanisms are selectively and effectively applied according to local water pollution and economic conditions. From the horizontal diffusion within Zhejiang province, we understand that RCS diffuses actively and horizontally from one city to another. Despite water pollution at various levels, above analysis explains that coercion with the promotion of good idea of political development and leadership demonstration give the impetus for horizontal competition. Besides, economic and pollution conditions affect the strategies of horizontal diffusion of RCS. In literature, purpose of mimicry is argued not being entirely for policy outcome to solve practical problems in many situations (Smith 2013; Shipan and Volden 2008). RCS’s success diffusion makes a light shine on politics of diffusion and its mechanisms of matching local needs, central preferences and local policy environment.

China's RCS 'Politics of Diffusion' Mode

Above analysis illuminates in RCS diffusion how multiple diffusion mechanisms interact and promote effective policy adoption to match local needs, central preferences and local policy environment. The following discussion focuses on the mechanisms that underpins the success of RCS diffusion to match local needs and central preferences in the Chinese 'politics of diffusion' mode. Studies of local policy innovation and diffusion in China assert the importance of cadre responsibility system, and local governors expect future career promotion by being good policy entrepreneurs and implementers (Edin 2003). In the Chinese cadre evaluation system, meeting local needs, as one of the evaluation criteria, has fundamental impact on local development (Heberer and Trappel 2013). Arguably, the cadre responsibility system is crucial to good performance in policy innovation and implementation. As it discusses above, the study finds the variations of policy implementation and selective policy adoption strategy in S county of Anhui province, who is confined by the local economic and environmental conditions. At this point, the cadre responsibility system gives inadequate explanation. Skinner, Joseph, and Kuhn (2003) study the changing role of local government in social and environmental regulation in Huzhou Municipality where Changxing county is located. They find the ability of local government's selective policy implementation conditioned by the local priorities, and point out it is because of administrative decentralization and devolution of administrative responsibility. Furthering the changing role of local government in front of the trade-off between local economic development and environmental regulation, RCS reinforces the political responsibility of the river chiefs, key leaders of the Party and government at provincial, municipal, county, township and village levels (Hao 2017).

Although it is stated that China's politics of diffusion is demonstrated by top-down mechanisms (Teets 2016), our study contends that bottom-up diffusion mechanisms are critical to effective policy diffusion in China's RCS 'politics of diffusion' mode. It sheds

light on the key political factors driving the success of RCS diffusion from Changxing county to the nation: political responsibility, political responsiveness and political opportunity. Under the Party and Government leadership, top-down diffusion works with the coercion mechanism propelled by the good idea of sustainability in political development and political leadership demonstration. This is resonated by the status of Yu the Great, and Xi's significant effort to rural development and environmental governance from the Zhejiang policy experiment to the promulgation and diffusion of RCS in China. Under the pressure of coercion mechanism, learning, mimicry and competition mechanisms are strategically applied by local actors in local policy environment. Interaction of coercion and learning, mimicry and competition mechanisms promote effective policy adoption to match both local needs, central preferences and local policy environment. Bottom-up diffusion mechanisms are underlined by public participation and persuasion in the process of RCS diffusion. The importance of public participation is addressed in sustainable river governance in China (Yang, Lu, and Ran 2016). Over the course of RCS diffusion, the pressure of participation and persuasion mechanisms nudge the political responsiveness from the top to public interests. Absorbing and adapting mechanisms of diffusion are produced as the modification of diffusion mechanisms by interaction of mechanisms in top-down, bottom-up and horizontal dimensions. These two diffusion mechanisms enhance the actors' responsiveness to water environmental issues, related policies implementation and collective action in specific policy environment.

China's RCS 'politics of diffusion' mode also emphasizes political opportunity as one of the political drivers for the success of RCS diffusion. The importance of grasping political opportunity is illustrated in the interaction between horizontal diffusion mechanisms and top-down diffusion mechanisms. In Zhejiang, leadership demonstration is embedded in coercion mechanism, and it made local officials in Changxing and neighboring cities identify and grasp the political opportunity to trigger RCS diffuse swiftly in Zhejiang and Jiangsu provinces in the early 2000s. The above

analysis shows that S county in Anhui province demonstrates that grasping the political opportunity is conditioned by the local economic and environmental context. This casts light on the importance of local policy environment in understanding multiple diffusion mechanisms (Zhang and Zhu 2019).

Local Policy Adoption

China's 'politics of diffusion' mode illuminates the interaction of diffusion mechanisms. In the political process of diffusion, two modification diffusion mechanisms are produced, absorbing and adapting mechanisms, as presented above. The following analysis concerns how politics of diffusion mechanisms work in RCS to influence the outcome of diffusion and local policy adoption. Based on study of RCS in Zhejiang and Anhui provinces, we compare and identify two types modification diffusion mechanisms, and their effect on the outcome of diffusion. Over the course of interaction of diffusion mechanisms in top-down, bottom-up and horizontal dimensions, RCS diffusion witnesses the modification of diffusion mechanisms within a particular local policy environment. This has significant impact on local policy adoption. Changxing County is the birthplace of RCS when confronting severe water pollution in the Taihu Basin in the early 2000s. Encouraged by the provincial leadership demonstration and good idea of sustainability in political development, party leaders from the provincial to local levels shoulder the responsibility and seize the political opportunity in environmental governance. Political responsibility in water governance was clearly established as the top priority for party leaders in Zhejiang as early as 2003.

Shouldering the political responsibility, river chiefs at the local level consider political opportunity as leadership demonstration by good performance for local people's livelihood improvement. A county river chief in Changxing County in the municipality of Huzhou told us that "*political responsibility gives us the opportunity to being a good local leader for our local people*". Huzhou Municipality was rewarded the *Yu the Great*

Award for three successive years. This award is the most prestigious thing for water governance in Zhejiang province. Local people's participation in water governance gives the pressure on river chiefs' political responsibility and nudges the political responsiveness from the river chiefs in the locality. Apparently, RCS diffusion from Changxing County to Zhejiang province uses top-down coercion mechanism, horizontal mimicry, learning and competition mechanisms, and bottom-up participating and persuasion mechanisms. Modification mechanisms are identified as adapting and absorbing mechanisms. Adapting mechanism is generated when diffusion adapts local policy environment; and absorbing mechanism is generated to facilitate the RCS diffusion by matching the public interests with the central preference expressed in the official RCS promotion documents. The outcome of diffusion is illuminated by how RCS is adopted locally.

In Zhejiang, RCS is not only diffused and implemented, but also policy innovation is carried out in various localities to adapt local policy environment. A provincial river leader commented: *"in order to avoid RCS becomes a mere formality, we make each river an archive and 'one river one policy' including every details of the river pollution points, water quality and open sewers. When the water pollution point is identified, we make 'one point one policy' at the local level"*. In line with the diffusion of RCS in Zhejiang, environmental related chiefs such as forest chiefs and road chiefs are institutionalised from Changxing to neighboring counties, cities and provinces. The modification of policy diffusion mechanisms, adapting and absorbing mechanisms, enhance the actors' responsiveness to policy implementation and innovation in particular local policy environment.

For S county of Anhui province, water resources are abundant and in a fair condition. When RCS was promulgated at the end of 2016, river chief offices have been established from provincial to local levels in Anhui, and RCS was implemented in S county. By comparing the diffusion mechanisms with that in Zhejiang, it reveals a

variation in diffusion mechanisms and outcome of diffusion. Little public involvement is associated with low level of political responsiveness. Political responsibility for river chiefs in S county is given by the top levels of river chief offices. In terms of RCS diffusion, besides top-down coercion mechanism, the horizontal dimension is mainly mimicry mechanism and bottom-up mechanism is apparently very weak. Zhejiang's experience of RCS is selectively copied in S county to adapt local policy environment.

In addition to top-down, bottom-up and horizontal diffusion mechanisms, adapting mechanism in policy diffusion leads to selective RCS implementation in S county. In the case of RCS diffusion from Changxing county to Zhejiang province, bottom-up mechanisms play critical role in China's politics of diffusion. In the process of policy diffusion, official river chiefs' political responsiveness is activated by public participation and persuasion. Bottom-up diffusion mechanisms provide fresh impetus for river chiefs' shouldering political responsibility and grasping political opportunity to achieve effective RCS diffusion. Indeed, diffusion and modification mechanisms in S county makes RCS implemented adaptively and selectively in its local context. In the politics of diffusion mode, exercising political responsibility is the priority for S county, which is highlighted in the "Opinions on the Comprehensive Implementation of the RCS". Political opportunity and responsiveness are considered as the "priority in the second place" by the river chiefs in S county, which is explained by one of the river chiefs: *"We learn and copy good experience from Zhejiang. The priority is to follow what is stressed in the document from the top. The emphasis is our [river chiefs] political responsibility in implementing RCS. Step by step, we will consider and organize activities for local people's participation in monitoring water quality and telling us their opinion about our work. I believe this will improve our work performance and hopefully our work will be recognized by our bosses in the future"*.

Conclusion

The success of RCS diffusion is apparently shown in the outcome of improving river environment in China. Under the leadership of Party and Government at each level, water pollution in Taihu Basin is tackled with the achievement of significant results. Following Zhejiang, Jiangsu and Shanghai, Fujian, Beijing and many other provinces began to implement the RCS. In December 2016, Central Office of the Communist Party of China and the General Office of the State Council issued “Opinions on the Comprehensive Implementation of the RCS”. On 1 January 2017, General Secretary Xi Jinping highlighted in his New Year's message that every river should have a river chief. In June 2017, the RCS is firstly written in the newly amended “Water Pollution Prevention and Control Law of the People's Republic of China”. By the end of June 2018, 31 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities directly under the Central Government have fully established the RCS.

This article addresses two questions: first, how do multiple diffusion mechanisms interact and promote effective policy adoption to match both local needs and central preferences in the Chinese ‘politics of diffusion’ mode; and second, whether are there modifications of mechanisms of diffusion in China’s local context? It looks into interactions of multi-dimensional diffusion mechanisms of RCS policy development; and the mechanisms that underpins the effective RCS diffusion to match local needs and central preferences in the Chinese ‘politics of diffusion’ mode within specific local policy environment. Developing a framework of China’s politics of diffusion mode based on the analysis of RCS, the study contributes in-depth understanding of policy diffusion in present China, explaining how multiple diffusion mechanisms interact in the Chinese ‘politics of diffusion’ mode. Political factors in the politics of diffusion mode are identified as political responsibility, political responsiveness and political opportunity. In previous studies, politics of diffusion is considered as being dominated by top-down diffusion mechanisms (Teets 2016). The research finds that bottom-up

diffusion mechanisms play important role in China's politics of diffusion mode. The bottom-up diffusion mechanisms give impetus to modification of mechanisms and nudge the political factors towards influencing effective diffusion. Modification of diffusion mechanisms are created in accordance with particular local policy environment, promoting effective policy adoption to match both local needs and central preferences. RCS propels political responsibility and political responsiveness to the needs of local river governance within specific local policy environment. Interactions of multi-dimensional mechanisms accelerates the diffusion from a local initiative to a nationwide adoption to grasp political opportunity. Interactions of multi-dimensional diffusion mechanisms also demonstrates the political resiliency and adaptability in China's politics of diffusion, which account for the success of China's adaptive local governance and policy innovation through policy experimentation from local experimentation points to national policy (Heilmann 2018). Nonetheless, it warrants attention that diffusion mechanisms and different approaches are conditioned by local policy environment, resources limit and political priorities. In order to achieve promising local policy adoption and be environmentally sustainable, it raises the importance of encouraging public participation in policy diffusion process to form bottom-up diffusion mechanisms which nudge effective policy diffusion.

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