

Organisational Learning Analysis and Transfers of “Eco-City” Concepts to China

The Example of Yangzhou

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ABSTRACT: This article aims at showing the benefits of applying organisational learning theories to the study of transfers of eco-city concepts to China. Following this recommendation in the study of the transfer of the concept of “careful urban renewal” to the city of Yangzhou, this article shows that the contribution of international cooperation to reforming local urban development practices can be strongly hindered by the extant institutional and organisational structures. Consequently, the reform process may present characteristics of instability and patchiness, in turn resulting in a selective, gradual and uncertain introduction of new approaches to city (re)development.

KEYWORDS: transfers, eco-cities, careful urban renewal, organisational learning, Yangzhou inner city.

Since the beginning of the 2000s, the Chinese government has established several international partnerships on the topic of “sustainable urban development” (SUD). These partnerships have involved different topics of cooperation, and among them we can include recent initiatives aimed at developing new eco-cities on the outskirts of Chinese cities. Some of these projects have already reached their first stages of development and have started hosting their first inhabitants. However, early research on Chinese eco-cities has underlined that, for the time being, these projects display disappointing results in their pursuit of SUD. For instance, some scholars have questioned the dubious ecological concepts of these projects, which propose to solve environmental problems by means of a technological fix.⁽¹⁾ The literature has also evidenced that social questions are poorly addressed by these projects, with eco-cities mainly targeting domestic and international elites.⁽²⁾ More generally, the search for profit and the methods and concepts employed for the realisation of these eco-cities have led scholars to qualify these experiences as failures.⁽³⁾

Given these somewhat discouraging results and given the fact that many of these projects are the fruit of international partnerships, we wonder what the added value of foreign knowledge in these projects is. Following the definition provided by Claire Colomb, the “added value” of cooperation results from its capacity “to tackle specific strategic spatial issues at a new scale and in a better way than without cooperation.”⁽⁴⁾ It also results from its capacity to “solve spatial planning problems which were previously addressed in an inefficient way.”⁽⁵⁾ If we assume that international cooperation has added value, what can explain these poor results in the transfer of eco-city concepts to China? To what extent is the knowledge provided by cooperation projects “utilised and implemented” by receivers, and how much does this knowledge contribute “to changing working routines in partner organisations”?⁽⁶⁾

We will try to answer these questions by taking inspiration from the methodology proposed by this author. For Colomb, “the (potential) added value” results from “organisational and policy learning,”⁽⁷⁾ hence we focus research on these aspects, studying the processes of organisational and policy learning in the receiving society. In particular, we use the example of the transfer of the concept of “careful urban renewal” to the city of Yangzhou, a case we have explored in our doctoral studies. We introduce some elements of the learning process that took place in this city during and after its partnership with the German technical cooperation agency

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1. I-Chun Catherine Chang and Eric Sheppard, “China’s Eco-Cities as Variegated Urban Sustainability: Dongtan Eco-City and Chongming Eco-Island,” *Journal of Urban Technology*, Vol. 20, No. 1, January 2013, pp. 57-75. See also Simon Joss and Arthur P. Molella, “The Eco-City as Urban Technology: Perspectives on Caofeidian International Eco-City (China),” *Journal of Urban Technology*, Vol. 20, No. 1, January 2013, pp. 115-37.
2. Federico Caprotti, Cecilia Springer and Nichola Harmer, “Eco’ For Whom? Envisioning Eco-Urbanism in the Sino-Singapore Tianjin Eco-City, China,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, Vol. 39, No. 3, May 2015, pp. 495-517. See also Julie Sze and Yi Zhou, “Imagining a Chinese Eco-City,” in Stephanie Le Menager et al. (eds), *Environmental Criticism for the Twenty-First Century*, London and New York, Routledge, 2011, pp. 216-230.
3. Chien Shih-Shen, “Chinese Eco-Cities: A Perspective of Land-Speculation-Oriented Local Entrepreneurialism,” *China Information*, Vol. 27, No. 2, July 2013, pp. 173-196. See also Julie Sze and Yi Zhou, “Imagining a Chinese Eco-City,” *op. cit.*
4. Claire Colomb, “The added value of transnational cooperation: Towards a new framework for evaluating learning and policy change,” *Planning Practice and Research*, Vol. 22, No. 3, August 2007, pp. 347-72, p.347.
5. *Ibid.* In her paper, Colomb proposes to develop a new research framework to evaluate the impacts of European INTERREG programs.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 363.
7. Claire Colomb, “The added value of transnational cooperation: Towards a new framework for evaluating learning and policy change,” *Planning Practice and Research*, *op. cit.*, p. 348.

(GTZ). We base our research on several interviews conducted with agents of international cooperation, local officials, and local experts, in Yangzhou and in other cities, and on the analysis of cooperation reports, policy documents, and articles concerning the Yangzhou project.⁽⁸⁾ Through this focus on the aspects of organisational and policy learning, this study will show that organisational social norms, hierarchy, and changing city politics can seriously hinder local learning processes and attempts at reforming the policies and practices of urban development and at consolidating new institutions. Hence, we argue that in the case of Yangzhou, the existing organisational and institutional structures limit the potential added value of international cooperation to help reform the local practices of spatial planning and urban development.

A brief review of the literature: On the transfer of eco-city concepts to China

To date, the only scholar who has focused on the transfers of eco-city concepts to China from a public policy perspective is Martin de Jong.⁽⁹⁾ His work sheds light on the ways in which transfers of eco-city concepts take place in China. These projects are sometimes accompanied by consistent investments from foreign partners (e.g. the Sino-Singaporean examples of the Suzhou eco-park and Tianjin eco-city), who consequently provide knowledge and funds. In other cases, partnerships involve international architectural and planning companies proposing concepts to local decision-makers, while investment from the foreign counterparts remains more limited (a model particularly used by European countries, as their investment availability is limited).⁽¹⁰⁾ In a paper entitled "China's art of institutional bricolage: Selectiveness and gradualism in the policy transfer style of a nation", de Jong in particular takes the transfer of eco-city concepts as an example to engage in a broader discussion about institutional transfers in China.⁽¹¹⁾ Insisting on the presence of path dependencies in the ways adopted by the Chinese government to import foreign institutions, de Jong sees the current translations given to eco-city concepts in China as illustrating the particular selective and gradualist ways through which the country absorbs concepts from abroad. The reasons for such selective and gradualist approaches have to be found in the ability of Chinese decision-makers to freely revise the original ideas of international agents to adapt them to the local context and to align them with the existing "administrative arrangements and underlying cultures."⁽¹²⁾ In particular, in the case of eco-cities we can observe the presence of "ad hoc, fragmented, and opportunistic" imports of foreign concepts, the results of which are represented by "knowledge and high-technology cities" that mainly respond to the agenda of the Chinese government.⁽¹³⁾ De Jong draws these conclusions from fieldwork experience, as the author participated with other experts in a project involving the city of Shenzhen and aimed at developing a vision for an eco-town. He observed that the local government only selected a few elements of their broader proposal, hence "much of the original underlying thinking had been replaced by considerations of rapid construction, limited budgets, attraction of prestigious companies and promotion of the area as a Low Carbon City showcase."⁽¹⁴⁾

We found many of these considerations in the words of several experts who participated in international cooperation projects on the topic of eco-city or "low-carbon city" development. Selectiveness, lack of citizen participation and the refusal to let residents participate, lack of interdepartmental coordination, a focus on prestige, and repeated demands for investment

were pinpointed as the main issues that made it difficult for foreign partners to collaborate with their local counterparts in China. They were also seen as key reasons for the discouraging results obtained by these projects (in the eyes of cooperation agents). Conclusions about these experiences were quite negative, with the most "successful" examples (projects that have been effectively realised) being criticised for weak adherence to their initial plans. For instance, in one of the cases we explored, a representative of the urban planning committee of a site currently under construction in Shanghai openly admitted that adherence to the low-carbon standards for buildings suggested by the international experts collaborating with the committee remained only on paper. First of all, we were told that these standards were translated as recommendations rather than compulsory requirements for buildings. Secondly, we were also told that none of the plans submitted by developers respected these recommendations.⁽¹⁵⁾ If technical requirements were made compulsory, no developer would have invested in the area. Fieldwork results thus confirmed de Jong's observations, and made us lean towards considering eco-city experiences in China as the ultimate trendy efforts at place-branding. By this token, the words eco- or low-carbon have to be considered mere slogans.⁽¹⁶⁾

However, notwithstanding the clear presence of problems in the current practice of eco-city development in China, fieldwork and literature review on SUD also advised refraining from too quickly arriving at negative evaluations. In particular, two main considerations were suggested. First of all, as noted by Mark Whitehead, many interpretations of the so-called "sustainable city" tend to consider it a reified object.⁽¹⁷⁾ This author prefers to think that the sustainable city *per se* does not exist, but has to be considered "in a constant state of *becoming*."⁽¹⁸⁾ Hence, we shall look at processes rather than at objects. Secondly, given this procedural nature of the sustainable

8. This article is based on the data collected for our doctoral studies. Some interviews directly refer to the case of Yangzhou. We also conducted more than 60 interviews with experts in architecture, urban planning, agents of international cooperation, companies, and city officials to collect insights about other international projects. Interviews were conducted from early 2013 to mid-2015.
9. Other contributions on the topic of eco-city developments in China have mostly focused on the planning concepts of these realisations, as well as on their implementation. The question of transfers has not really been tackled by these contributions. Some scholars have nevertheless highlighted the political and economic significance of these projects, eco-cities being mostly considered as means to foster the local economy, to attract talent in a context of increasing interurban competition, and as opportunities for city mayors to sign "vanity" projects to advance in their career paths. See Choon Piew Pow and Harvey Neo, "Seeing Red Over Green: Contesting Urban Sustainabilities in China," *Urban Studies*, Vol. 50, No. 11, 2013, pp. 2256-2274.
10. See Martin de Jong, Dong Wang, and Chang Yu, "Exploring the Relevance of the Eco-City Concept in China: The Case of Shenzhen Sino-Dutch Low Carbon City," *Journal of Urban Technology*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2013, pp. 95-113; Martin de Jong, Chang Yu, Xinting Chen, and Margot Weijnen, "Developing robust organizational frameworks for Sino-foreign eco-cities: Comparing Sino-Dutch Shenzhen Low Carbon City with other initiatives," *Journal of Cleaner Production*, Vol. 57, October 2013, pp. 209-220.
11. Martin de Jong, "China's art of institutional bricolage: Selectiveness and gradualism in the policy transfer style of a nation," *Policy and Society, East-West Policy Transfer*, Vol. 32, No. 2, May 2013, pp. 89-101.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 98.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 99. This agenda, for de Jong, is mainly dictated by "technological development, economic growth, a dominant state apparatus, opportunities for entrepreneurs at the osmosis of the public and the private sectors and a comparatively passive and reactive civil society."
14. *Ibid.*, p. 98.
15. Personal communication, Shanghai, April 2014.
16. Hu Xiulian, "Zhongguo chengshi ditan fazhan de wenti yu jianyi" (Problems and suggestions about China's low carbon city), in Fan Gang and Ma Yuhua, *Ditan chengshi zai xingdong: zhengce yu shijian* (Low carbon city in action: policy and practice), Beijing, Zhongguo jingji chubanshe, 2010, pp. 81-97.
17. Mark Whitehead, "(Re)Analysing the Sustainable City: Nature, Urbanisation and the Regulation of Socio-environmental Relations in the UK," *Urban Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 7, 2003, pp. 1183-1206.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 1187. Original emphasis.

city, or rather of SUD, we surely have to take into consideration the important dimension of time, which is particularly lacking in evaluations of eco-city projects in China. Actually, we observed that existing evaluations mostly focused on on-the-spot observations, observing the outcomes of eco-city projects either in the course of cooperation or few years after the end of international partnerships. However, in order to ensure that we can detect the presence of added value, we have studied projects after a certain time and recorded “the medium-term use of the knowledge and lessons learned.”⁽¹⁹⁾ We therefore suggest adopting an alternative framework that studies transfers through a focus on learning. Focusing on this aspect can provide a deeper understanding of the outcomes of eco-city development in China. This approach, we believe, can enrich our knowledge of transfers of SUD concepts to China, and more generally can provide a cross-section of the activities of a city in reforming its development paths.

An alternative framework for studying transfers applied to the experience of the city of Yangzhou

This discussion is based on the suggestions made by Claire Colomb to develop a new research framework capable of putting “learning’ at the heart of analysis.”⁽²⁰⁾ Acknowledging that evaluations of transfers in the field of spatial planning often lack “a concrete methodological approach” capable of supporting the claims made by the relative literature “with empirical evidence,” this author suggests developing a new research framework that focuses on intra- and inter-organisational learning. Such a framework shifts the focus of evaluations from the search for direct impact on local strategies of urban development to more complex questions of learning within organisations. To this aim, its construction can draw from several theoretical approaches, relying on the work of scholars who have focused on organisational learning, e.g., Wolman and Page, Hall, and Argyris.⁽²¹⁾ Through this new perspective, researchers can make more careful assessments about transfers and the observed phenomena of change (if any), and can also realise that the observed results may not be directly linked to transfers but to other phenomena, and more broadly to local processes of policy-making.⁽²²⁾

We would like to particularly emphasise that these considerations are valid provided that international partnerships on the topic of eco-city transfers genuinely aim at delivering technical assistance in spatial planning, and are not merely occasions for foreign architects and planners to realise their “global fantasies of what an ecological life and experience would look like.”⁽²³⁾ Together with other authors, we doubt that in certain partnerships the type of added value described by Colomb was really at the heart of their intentions.⁽²⁴⁾ We would also like to stress that these considerations are valid if international concepts have been accepted by partner cities, i.e., if there was genuine local interest in assistance from international partners. As underlined by Wade Jacoby, without the presence of local actors in favour of reform, any attempt at institutional transfer is doomed to irrelevancy.⁽²⁵⁾ Hence it is important to assess whether we can identify endogenous processes of local reform in the studied locality.

The case of Yangzhou

After a careful selection of potential case studies, we have focused on an initiative of international cooperation concerning the city of Yangzhou

(Jiangsu Province) between the years 2000 and 2007. At that time, Yangzhou benefitted from the assistance of the German technical cooperation agency (GTZ, *Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit*) to explore methods for eco-city planning and management.⁽²⁶⁾ Seven years after the end of the project, we learnt that few proposals of the German agents were accepted by the local authorities, and these mostly focused on protecting the traditional quarters of Yangzhou’s inner city. Other proposals on environmental topics, for instance the detoxification of city canals, did not produce any significant results.

As for the protection of the inner city, GTZ suggested exploring the concept of “careful urban renewal” (*behutsame Stadterneuerung*), developed in Berlin at the end of the 1970s and early 1980s.⁽²⁷⁾ This concept was proposed to stop existing practices of urban renewal that consisted of razing entire old neighbourhoods, relocating the population to the outskirts, and reconstructing buildings in a faux-antique style to foster commercial and touristic uses. Through careful urban renewal, the inner city is instead restored through a gradual process, in particular through improving the life conditions of its residents, and through harnessing the economic potential of the area by offering residents opportunities to develop small businesses. Careful urban renewal should also improve the habitat of the inner city by involving residents in the process, by protecting neighbourhood relationships, and by adapting to residents’ financial capacities. It also aims at revitalising the inner city by paying attention to social issues and environmental concerns.⁽²⁸⁾

When we embarked on this fieldwork in late 2013, we first communicated with GTZ agents, who left Yangzhou in 2007, to collect their evaluations of the initiative. Their observations were very similar to those made by de Jong: namely, that the local partners in Yangzhou only accepted technical suggestions, while proposals concerning institutional reform or the question of governance of urban renewal were dismissed by typical answers such as “In China we cannot do this,” or, “This doesn’t work in China,” or, “China and the West are different.”⁽²⁹⁾ We also learnt that the proposal to involve residents in the planning process was not particularly welcomed by the local

19. Claire Colomb, “The added value of transnational cooperation: Towards a new framework for evaluating learning and policy change,” *art. cit.*, p. 365.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 348, original emphasis.

21. Colomb’s suggestions will be considered methodological recommendations for studying this type of transfer. In her article, she provides a list of possible sociological approaches to studying processes of intra- and inter-organisational learning, such as social learning literature, sociology of innovation, institutional analysis, theories of organisational learning, etc.

22. Oliver James and Martin Lodge, “The Limitations of ‘Policy Transfer’ and ‘Lesson Drawing’ for Public Policy Research,” *Political Studies Review*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2003, pp. 179–93.

23. Julie Sze and Yi Zhou, “Imagining a Chinese Eco-City,” *art. cit.*, p. 220.

24. See for instance the case of the Sino-American partnership for the realisation of the ecological village of Huangbaiyu: Shannon May, “A Sino-U.S. Sustainability Sham,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, April 2007, pp. 57–60.

25. Wade Jacoby, *Imitation and politics: Redesigning modern Germany*, New York, Cornell University Press, 2000, p. 213.

26. The city was selected by the Chinese government as one of the first pilot cities to prepare eco-city plans. It was also selected as a pilot city of the partnership established by the Chinese and German governments on the occasion of the “Sino-German Environmental Conference,” held in December 2000.

27. On the origin of careful urban renewal, see Matthias Bernt, *Rübegeklappt. Die “Behutsame Stadterneuerung” im Berlin der 90er Jahre* (Folded: “Careful urban renewal” in the Berlin of the 90s), Berlin, Schelzky & Jeep, 2003.

28. Longbin Zhu, Peter Herrle, and Sonja Nebel, *Yangzhou Urban Upgrading Strategy*, Nanjing, Phoenix Science Press, 2007.

29. Personal communications with (former and still in charge) GTZ agents in Nanjing, October 2013; Shanghai, December 2013; Berlin, January 2014 and June 2014.

authorities. For this reason, it was only tested in a small and controlled pilot project involving a few residents.⁽³⁰⁾ These observations were also confirmed by an article published in 2014, which assessed the impact of GTZ's assistance to Yangzhou in the promotion of resident participation in urban renewal. For the author, the project conducted by GTZ did not have a significant policy impact on the Yangzhou government's priorities, which continued to focus on increasing land value and on realising vanity projects.⁽³¹⁾

Further access to fieldwork then presented us with a very puzzling situation. We observed that the pilot experience realised in 2007 produced buds five years later. The local government experimented with resident participation in a larger pilot zone,⁽³²⁾ and also established new policies and new focal points in local planning documents. Resident participation was included in major plans and policies issued by the city government in the early 2010s, together with other concepts such as "gradual revitalisation of the inner city," the importance of maintaining existing neighbourhood relationships, attention to the varying financial capacity of inner city residents, *inter alia*.⁽³³⁾ All these concepts had been suggested by GTZ agents and explored during the years of international cooperation.⁽³⁴⁾

Given the initial evaluations of the cooperation agents, who doubted that these topics were of any interest to the local authorities, the discovery of these elements was quite surprising. They made us fully understand the importance of proceeding with an *ex-post* evaluation some years after the completion of cooperation projects.⁽³⁵⁾ In particular, we observed the presence of a relationship between the process of learning undertaken by the Yangzhou authorities and the outcomes of the transfer of "careful urban renewal". However, we also observed the presence of significant limitations to this process of learning and institutional reform. During our enquiries, officials lamented the fact that it was impossible to continue following the model proposed by GTZ.⁽³⁶⁾ We therefore decided to dig further into this aspect with the help of theories of organisational learning. This procedure eventually proved very fruitful in learning about the capacity of the Yangzhou administration to reform its own practices of urban redevelopment.

Fieldwork observation I: Organisational learning and the weight of hierarchy and social norms

For Harold Wolman and Ed Page, organisational learning occurs "when individuals acting on behalf of an organisation and interacting with others in the organisation learn in such a way that the beliefs, attitudes, or values of relevant organisational members change," as well as "organisational behaviour."⁽³⁷⁾ Concerning organisational learning, Chris Argyris wrote that "organizational and bureaucratic political factors" significantly impact "the amount and quality of the learning during decision making."⁽³⁸⁾ In particular, he underlined that existing "theories-in-use" and social norms may hinder learning processes, which in turn are aimed precisely at changing these same theories-in-use.⁽³⁹⁾ If we take account of these elements in the study of transfers, we can provide new explanations for the fact that projects of international cooperation may result in failures or partial failures, as well as for the difficulty of producing significant impact and change. In particular, it will be possible to show that it is not merely a matter of individuals adhering to specific social norms within their work environment; superiors and subordinates in an organisation may take on great risk when trying to reconsider existing norms and practice.

These aspects also emerged from our fieldwork. For instance, we were often told that it is not appropriate behaviour in China to teach superiors. An official told us that some concepts introduced by international cooperation – like the preservation of the authenticity and historical style of buildings – were already known to many of them, but they could not propose these ideas to their superiors.⁽⁴⁰⁾ There are modalities for "subtly suggesting" possible solutions or innovations, for instance through proposing them in policy drafts. However, even if many proposals of international agents are theoretically supported by some officials, it is much preferred for superior cadres themselves to acknowledge the problem and order the adoption of measures to reform existing practices. As result, for many years the Construction Bureau (CB) continued to prefer the method of demolishing traditional buildings and reconstructing them in a fake antique style. It was only in 2010–2011 that the first local policies and regulations to protect existing buildings and their authenticity were issued, and it was only in those years that projects started to effectively apply these principles. This result, in the eyes of our interviewees, has to be ascribed to the fact that superior cadres "learnt by themselves" and promoted the insertion of these themes in relevant policy documents.

Subordinate officials at the level of "division chief" (the so-called *chuzhang* 处长 and *kezhang* 科长)⁽⁴¹⁾ are normally responsible for policy drafting, but they avoid making proposals when they observe that departmental leaders are not interested in new approaches (but have significant power to decide their career opportunities).⁽⁴²⁾ For instance, in the case of the collaboration between GTZ and the city's Environmental Protection Bureau (EPB), officials told us they were already aware of many of the ideas proposed by the foreign agents and that they wished to experiment with them through pilot projects.⁽⁴³⁾ However, without the support of their departmental leadership, no practical experimentation

30. Personal communication, Nanjing, November 2014.

31. Li Fan, "International influence and local response: Understanding community involvement in urban heritage conservation in China," *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 6, 2014, pp. 651–662.

32. Lü Kai and Zheng Lu, "Cong chongtu dao hezuu: lishi wenhua jiequ fazhan yu dangdi jumin guanxi de zhenghe – zhengfu yindao xing shequ canyu zai Yangzhou Caiyijie xiangmu de shijian yu qishi" (From conflict to collaboration: Integrating the relationships between tourism development and local residents – practice of government-led community participation in the Caiyi St. project of Yangzhou), *Chengshi guihua*, Vol. 3, No. 319, 2014, pp. 80–84.

33. E.g. Yangzhou shi zhengfu (Yangzhou City Government), *Yangzhou gucheng baohu guanli banfa* (Administrative Measures for the Protection of the Old City), Yangzhou, 24th November 2010.

34. The Yangzhou government also explored methods to integrate ecological measures (for instance energy saving appliances) in new buildings constructed according to the traditional style, also following the lessons learnt with GTZ.

35. Claire Colomb, "The added value of transnational cooperation: Towards a new framework for evaluating learning and policy change," *art. cit.*, pp. 355–356.

36. Personal communication, Yangzhou, December 2013.

37. Harold Wolman and Ed Page, "Policy Transfer among Local Governments: An Information-Theory Approach," *Governance: An International Journal of Policy, Administration, and Institutions*, Vol. 15, No. 4, October 2002, pp. 477–501, p. 478.

38. Chris Argyris, "Single-Loop and Double-Loop Models in Research on Decision Making," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 3, September 1976, pp. 363–75, p. 365.

39. As Argyris wrote, theories-in-use are "the basis of behaviour" and "represent a source of confidence that one has in functioning effectively in one's world." Hence, the alteration of these theories-in-use "is a very difficult process," as it requires individuals to question the rules of action that have always informed their activities. Moreover, the adoption of new rules can also be harmful for a given individual, "because others might use the new power and the trust against him or her." *Ibid.*, pp. 367–370.

40. Personal communication, Yangzhou, November 2014.

41. Sometimes the positions of *chuzhang* and *kezhang* are differentiated, and sometimes they are the same. In general, in Yangzhou they are considered responsible for similar tasks. Personal communication, Yangzhou, June 2015.

42. Personal communication, Yangzhou, November 2014.

43. Personal communication Yangzhou, December 2014.

was possible. An interviewee also shared with us his regret at having been sent abroad by the same department to study foreign experiences in environmental protection while having to acknowledge that much of the acquired knowledge was useless. Back in Yangzhou, the person realized that there were no opportunities to introduce new knowledge into the practices and policies of the department, as the department's superior cadres were not interested.⁽⁴⁴⁾

We dug further into this aspect, for instance by asking about the origin of departments' directors, their appointment criteria, and their attitudes vis-à-vis subordinates. We learnt that directors are selected by the municipal party secretary on the basis of criteria that do not necessarily encompass the individual's expertise in the field in which he/she will serve as departmental leader.⁽⁴⁵⁾ Officials also told us that in the case of the EPB, the directors were not experts in environmental protection, nor were they particularly interested in the work of the department.⁽⁴⁶⁾ As a matter of fact, one of these directors was the mistress of the municipal party secretary, a choice that was not particularly appreciated by the personnel of the department.⁽⁴⁷⁾ As for departmental leaders' attitudes, situations may also vary. Some leaders may prefer to work in collaboration with subordinates and solicit their advice. Others, on the contrary, may work independently and impose their will on subordinates.⁽⁴⁸⁾ In this case, division chiefs do not dare to act unless required to by their superiors. In other cases, these leaders may adopt opportunistic behaviours and act in accordance with particularistic interests. Consequently, learning within organisations can be strongly discouraged.

Departmental directors' attitudes may also vary vis-à-vis their superiors, namely the city mayor and the party secretary. Specifically, department directors may act in anticipation of the standpoints of the city leaders, avoiding the waste of political capital when they know their proposals will not find favour with these superiors.⁽⁴⁹⁾ An official declared “having lost hope” after a great deal of research and reports was totally ignored by the city leadership.⁽⁵⁰⁾ Another official whose career was dedicated to protecting the inner city shared the same sense of frustration: “Whatever we do is useless; whatever research, proposal, all the work we have done, it's useless.”⁽⁵¹⁾ We were also told that department directors have to obey the wishes of the city leadership, even if the decisions taken do not entirely respect planning documents, laws, or regulations, or might produce negative impacts.⁽⁵²⁾

As a result, although in the years following the GTZ initiative a “careful urban renewal mentality” has begun to develop in Yangzhou and was integrated into major planning documents and city policies under the order of the previous city leadership, these new institutions are being challenged by the approaches of the new city leadership. Ignoring the needs of the inner city and disregarding the policies, regulations, and plans issued in the early 2010s by Yangzhou's planning authorities, the incumbent mayor ordered the construction of a parking area with a capacity for 300 cars in the inner city to foster commercial and touristic development. This requires large-scale demolitions and the relocation of a large number of residents. Although some officials tried to suggest that this option presented the risk of major protests and was in conflict with relevant city plans, at the time of our enquiries the leadership's position remained firm and ill-considered.⁽⁵³⁾

Fieldwork observation II: The weight of interests in the fragmentation of the local governance of urban renewal

The examples cited so far have focused on the vertical aspects of organisations, hence on the vertical limits to organisational learning. This focus can

be enriched through extending the analysis to inter-organisational learning, and through considering the city government not as a unitary actor moved by a unique interest or a single purpose, but rather as a more complex aggregate of holders of multiple interests.⁽⁵⁴⁾ As suggested by Vivien Lowndes, we have to avoid “any unified conception of local government” and conversely “think about the coexistence, and interaction of forces for continuity and change.”⁽⁵⁵⁾ Within this perspective, we can highlight that conflict plays a great role, significantly hindering reform and learning. We can also show that even with a shared aim of city development, there is no agreement among decision-makers about the specific path and methods to pursue it. This aspect is evident in the case of Yangzhou, where we found a general consensus on the need to protect and revitalise the inner city, but also diverging voices as to the meaning of protection and revitalisation as well as the methods to be employed. These divergent voices can be found in the various departments of the local administration, and within the same departments.

In particular, we have observed that housing under public ownership is the major object of contention. The department in charge of its management, the Housing Management Bureau (HMB), opposes obstacles to the privatisation of traditional houses, as it wishes to maintain its “possession” of these buildings. In reality, this department is only supposed to manage these public assets, but the appropriation of public goods by the offices in charge of their management is a typical problem in Chinese administrations.⁽⁵⁶⁾ In recent years, this department has started to invite sitting tenants to leave their houses, to renovate these buildings by using high-level standards, and to rent them out to well-off newcomers.⁽⁵⁷⁾ This particular interpretation of departmental duties is of course criticised by other voices in Yangzhou, and especially by local partisans of careful urban renewal, which favour sitting tenants for the purchase of public housing.⁽⁵⁸⁾ However, given the current lack of support from the city leadership for the model of careful urban renewal, no superior power to departmental interests has come to strike a balance between diverging positions.⁽⁵⁹⁾ Consequently, the renovation model oriented to the conservation of the inner city, to its revitalisation through a gradual and participative process, and to the respect of residents' wishes is currently highly unstable, challenged by projects launched respectively by the city, district, and departmental leaderships, which make a mockery out of existing policy documents and statutory plans.

44. *Ibid.*

45. Personal communication, Yangzhou, June 2015. On this point, see Renate Mayntz, *Sociologia dell'amministrazione pubblica* (Sociology of public administration), Bologna, Il Mulino, 1982.

46. Personal communication, Yangzhou, November 2014.

47. Personal communication, Yangzhou, December 2014.

48. Personal communication, Yangzhou, June 2015.

49. *Ibid.* See also Renate Mayntz, *Sociologia dell'amministrazione pubblica* (Sociology of public administration), *op. cit.*

50. Personal communication, Yangzhou, December 2014.

51. Personal communication, Yangzhou, November 2014.

52. Personal communication, Yangzhou, June 2015.

53. *Ibid.*

54. Wing-Shing Tang, “Chinese Urban Planning at Fifty: An Assessment of the Planning Theory Literature,” *Journal of Planning Literature*, Vol. 14, No. 3, 2000, pp. 347–366.

55. Vivien Lowndes, “Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed ...,” *Policy Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 3–4, 2005, pp. 291–309, p. 292.

56. Lü Xiaobo, “Booty Socialism, Bureau-Preneurs, and the State in Transition: Organizational Corruption in China,” *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 32, No. 3, 2000, pp. 273–294.

57. Personal communication, Yangzhou, July 2015.

58. Personal communication, Yangzhou, June 2015.

59. Personal communication, Yangzhou, June 2015.

The case of Yangzhou also shows that "individuals' learning activities" can be "facilitated or inhibited by an ecological system of factors," which Argyris refers to as the "organizational learning system."⁽⁶⁰⁾ This system is in turn characterised by multiple levels of influence, hence by different decision-making levels, in which the single individual or the single organisation does not have a say. For example, in the case studied, international agents made the important suggestion of establishing an "Old City Office." Such an organisation would bring together the functions of several departments for the management of the old city. It would also gather specialised personnel on the various questions relating to the protection and renewal of traditional quarters, in order to conduct comprehensive studies on the area in view of policy-making.⁽⁶¹⁾ This office was effectively established in 2009 as a division of the CB, and in 2012 it was the object of an experiment that tried to bring together the responsibilities of three departments (the CB, the Urban Planning Bureau, and the City Management Bureau⁽⁶²⁾) in a one-stop shop to facilitate obtaining renovation permission. With the change of city leadership in 2013, this experiment was halted, because departments refused to concede part of their powers to this office and because it was legally difficult to establish.⁽⁶³⁾ The subdivision of administrative competences is normally established by the central government, and any eventual change needs to be decided at this level.⁽⁶⁴⁾ Hence, as cities have no legal competence to change laws and regulations, Yangzhou could only reform its organisational arrangements through adopting a provisional solution, which lasted as long as the city leadership supported the work of the Old City Office. Since the new city leadership changed its development priorities, the experiment came to an end, and the Old City Office was also deprived of its management competences. As a result, decisions over renewal projects are now split among different actors, with the consequences that we have already seen.

What contribution did international cooperation make to Yangzhou? Considerations on institutional change

In the previous sections we have seen how the application of organisational learning theories in the study of transfers and learning processes can provide interesting insights to understanding how in China (and elsewhere) the contribution of international partnerships may result in failures but also in conceptual exploration, policy experimentation, and the adoption of new practices. The case of Yangzhou showed both types of outcomes. Through looking into the local organisational learning system, we could observe to what extent the knowledge provided by GTZ could be adapted and implemented by the partner agencies. We could also observe that new elements were integrated in local policies and practices, but also that these elements have not been entirely institutionalised. Here we reach the last step of our discussion, linking processes to outcomes and identifying the nexus between transfer, learning, and changes in local policies and practices.⁽⁶⁵⁾

To this aim we can draw insights, for example, from the literature on social learning and paradigm shifts, following Peter Hall's contributions, or from the sociology of translation in the form of "transcoding," as formulated by Pierre Lascoumes.⁽⁶⁶⁾ These authors suggest that the outcomes of learning processes rarely constitute revolutionary changes, but rather adjustments and incremental revision of past practices and past policies. For these authors, novelties are never created *ex nihilo* and are influenced by existing paths. Hence, the new institutions resulting from local learning processes

often consist of the products of "recombination and reshuffling" the "institutional material" already "at hand" that can be used "even when depleted" to realise new objectives.⁽⁶⁷⁾

The case of the establishment of Yangzhou's Old City Office in 2009 is a clear example of this. If GTZ proposed the creation of a special multi-departmental office, the Yangzhou city government on its side dusted off an existing office founded in 2004 and by that time largely ineffective, and gave it new personnel and new competences. This newly established office in turn also dusted off an idea already circulating in the early 2000s to foster interdepartmental coordination, and in 2010 instituted a "Joint Meeting System for the Protection of the Old City" to promote coordinated decision-making.⁽⁶⁸⁾ Another example of the influence of existing paths is the particular form of residents' participation practised by the Yangzhou government. According to a local expert involved in GTZ project, the Yangzhou administration did not really take over the small-scale and active model in the GTZ pilot project but rather brushed up the large-scale "mobilisation campaigns" typically used in contemporary Chinese history.⁽⁶⁹⁾ This local version of "participation" offers residents little chance to decide the priorities of renewal. Rather, they passively accept the government's plans while only being left with the option of whether or not to contribute to renewal. Even so, compared to the past practice of redeveloping areas through relocating residents, this new practice of resident participation certainly constitutes an important step forward.

Conclusion: The advantages of organisational analysis in the study of transfers to China

Through the cited examples drawn from the study of the transfer of careful urban renewal to Yangzhou, we can clearly observe that institutions matter and support de Jong's arguments. However, if we had insisted on the presence of path dependencies in explaining the ways through which Yangzhou decision-makers imported concepts from abroad, we would have

60. Chris Argyris, "Organizational learning and management information systems," *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1977, pp. 113-23, p. 117.

61. This idea did not originate with international cooperation agents, but was already circulating among some local officials who were particularly concerned with protecting the old city and who had carried out research on possible approaches to improve local management. The arrival of foreign experts gave them the opportunity to express their opinions to city leaders, as officials rarely dare to speak directly to their superiors (they clearly told us that they were not in a position to do so). Personal communication, Yangzhou, November 2014.

62. Commonly known as *chengguanju*, abbreviation of the expression "*Chengshi guanli xingzheng zhifa ju*," designating the "Bureau of city management for the application of laws."

63. Personal communication, Yangzhou, December 2014. It could have been authorised in the form of a local informal arrangement.

64. *Ibid.*; Personal communication, Yangzhou, June 2015.

65. However, we always need to be conscious that "a clear-cut causal link between transnational cooperation and changes in approaches, policies, and practices" may be difficult to detect. Claire Colomb, "The added value of transnational cooperation: Towards a new framework for evaluating learning and policy change," *art. cit.*, pp. 363 sq.

66. Peter A. Hall, "Policy Paradigms, Social Learning, and the State: The Case of Economic Policymaking in Britain," *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 25, No. 3, 1993, pp. 275-96; Pierre Lascoumes, "Rendre gouvernable : de la "traduction" au "transcodage" : l'analyse des processus de changement dans les réseaux d'action publique" (To make it governable: From "translation" to "transcoding": analysis of the processes of change in public action networks), *La Gouvernabilité*, CURAPP, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 1996, pp. 325-338.

67. Vivien Lowndes, "Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed ...," *art. cit.*, p. 299.

68. This institution consists of the directors of the city's 20 main departments related to the protection of the old city as well as the districts' leaders and the city's vice-mayor. Personal communication, Yangzhou, December 2014.

69. Personal communication, Yangzhou, November 2014.

largely overlooked the presence of possible path-breaking tendencies that are only visible through sociological approaches.⁽⁷⁰⁾ At the time of our enquiries, the situation of the management of Yangzhou’s inner city was not so different from the situation observed by the international cooperation agents. It was still fragmented and affected by various departmental interests. Local planning authorities also complained about their inability to continue exploring the concepts discussed with GTZ. However, as some recent renewal projects still showed a certain affiliation with the so-called “German model,” we doubted that the project of international cooperation had no significant impact. We thus opted for a “fine-grained” analysis,⁽⁷¹⁾ and we detected the presence of an endogenous learning process, which has not led to a complete overturning of past practices, but rather indicated the presence of (constrained) change. We discovered that the institutions and ideas of the model of careful urban renewal still exist in statutory planning documents, in the agenda of the Old City Office, and in the daily research of its dedicated personnel. We also learnt that, for the time being, its pursuit is limited by the lack of support from the city leadership, by the fragmented governance of the old city, and by a silent regulatory framework. However, we do not rule out that the situation may change again in the years to come. Finally, through the use of sociological approaches we also discovered that the characteristics of selectiveness and gradualism of Chinese imports, as identified by Martin de Jong, are not attributable purely to the willingness of the local administration, but also to the constraints on learning experienced by local reformers.

Precisely on this aspect we shall make another point. The international partnership pertaining to the city of Yangzhou, like the projects studied by Colomb, has to be understood as an occasion for “lesson drawing.” In this type of partnership, “actors voluntarily choose to engage in an active search for new ideas” to respond to problems or emerging dissatisfaction vis-à-vis the status quo.⁽⁷²⁾ This is an important point that needs to be highlighted and that also suggests caution in evaluating transfers. In his analysis, de Jong argues that the way in which China transfers lessons from abroad “revolves around letting the client set the policy agenda by himself, taking him and not the foreign donor as the yardstick for success.”⁽⁷³⁾ The first question that emerges after reading the broad literature on lesson-drawing and transfers would be whether other countries act differently in the case of non-coercive transfers.⁽⁷⁴⁾ We are not convinced of the idea of a “Chinese way” of transferring concepts from abroad. Rather, we think that gradualism and selectiveness may be common features of transfers. Secondly, we wonder who else should have the yardstick for success if not the local decision-makers, who have to invest money and political resources and take on a considerable amount of risk when experimenting with foreign concepts. Hence, we have to be aware that non-coercive transfers are more likely to result in combinations of old and new models produced by processes of socialisation and learning, undertaken by the local administration and in line with their policy objectives. Moreover, we also have to be aware that the outcomes of transfers, which may also be characterised by selectiveness and gradualism, rarely result exclusively from the rational decision of local reformers. Rather, selective and gradual reforms may also be the fruit of local struggles, of competing political visions and of competing interests. New institutions are rarely welcomed by the greater society, by all the politicians of a constituency, and by all the representatives of a government. Rather, they tend to enter a politicised and conflictive environment and compete against opposing institutions.⁽⁷⁵⁾

These aspects were very evident in Yangzhou. First of all, in terms of the ecological aspects of GTZ’s collaboration with Yangzhou, the project did not produce significant results. The reason has to be found in the lack of support from some departmental leaders for the pilot projects proposed both by GTZ and by the EPB officials collaborating with them. As their position in the hierarchy was that of chiefs of division, they did not have enough power to experiment with the proposals of the foreign agency. As for careful urban renewal, limited space prevents us from indicating each and every item accepted by Yangzhou’s reformers. However, we can indicate that they embraced the whole package of proposals made by GTZ, from involving residents in the planning process, to the introduction of subsidy schemes and special *ad hoc* arrangements, to helping vulnerable households renovate their houses. Yangzhou reformers also tried to introduce a subsidy scheme to encourage the use of energy-saving appliances and other ecological measures, and to introduce rent limits to avoid tenant displacement after renewal. These measures were not agreed to by all the members of the city government, and as soon as the city changed its main leadership, a large portion of these ideas were dismissed. For the time being, Yangzhou reformers are conducting their own research to develop new policies, hoping that in the future they will find new political support. Hence, the game is not over yet. These aspects also underline that we have to be open to recognising that there is not a shared interpretation of “sustainable city” to which local actors should adhere. Rather, the exploration of concepts of SUD necessarily results from struggles, hesitations, local adaptations, and the uncertainty surrounding these same concepts and their implementation.⁽⁷⁶⁾ What we can hope is that the criteria through which we evaluate the performances of eco-cities or sustainable cities can be established with the largest consensus of a city’s decision-makers, residents, and other interested stakeholders, always taking into account the specific characteristics of various territories. We can also hope, at the same time, that the monitoring of these performances is as participative as possible.

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70. Francesca Gains, Peter C. John, and Gerry Stoker, “Path Dependency and the Reform of English Local Government,” *Public Administration*, Vol. 83, No. 1, 2005, pp. 25–45.
71. Vivien Lowndes, “Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed ...,” *art. cit.*, p. 306.
72. Claire Colomb, “The added value of transnational cooperation: Towards a new framework for evaluating learning and policy change,” *art. cit.*, p. 350.
73. Martin de Jong, “China’s art of institutional bricolage: Selectiveness and gradualism in the policy transfer style of a nation,” *art. cit.*, p. 99.
74. See for instance Frank Schimmelfennig and Ulrich Sedelmeier, *The Europeanisation of Central and Eastern Europe*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 2005.
75. Wade Jacoby, *Imitation and politics: Redesigning modern Germany*, *op. cit.*
76. Harriet Bulkeley, “Urban Sustainability: Learning from Best Practice?,” *Environment and Planning*, Vol. 38, No. 6, 2006, pp. 1029–1044.