Policy Entrepreneurship, Institutional Constraints, and Local Policy Innovation in China*

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Abstract

Policy entrepreneurship has been a key concept to explain policy dynamics and policy changes. Despite considerable debate on the role of policy entrepreneurs in the policy-making process, insufficient effort has been put forth on motivations of policy entrepreneurs and interactions between policy entrepreneurs and other key players in different settings. This article explores the role of policy entrepreneurship in local policy process in a transitional society, China, with special reference to housing reform experience in Guizhou Province. It argues that value, knowledge, and tactics such as framing are crucial for policy

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entrepreneurship. The policy entrepreneur both is constrained by and takes advantage of existing institutional arrangements. By highlighting personal attributes and maneuvers of a key policy entrepreneur in introducing an innovative housing model, this research contributes to the literature on both the policy entrepreneur and local politics in China.

1. Introduction

Allowing or even pushing local governments to carry out policy experiments and formulating national policies drawing on local successful experiences have been distinctive features of the policy-making process in China, especially during the reform era. Despite numerous research on China’s policy dynamics, focusing mainly on ideology, leadership and the elite, decentralization, central–local relations, and administrative structure, insufficient research has been devoted to the policy processes of local policy innovations. In mainstream research, policy innovations in China are always conceived as accidental successes of reform-oriented local leaders or as outcomes of rational decision makers in search of performance either responding to high pressure from their superiors or because of intense regional competitions. While policy space and motivations for local innovations have been steadily elaborated, a big puzzle remains. How do ideas for innovation come from and gain prominence on government agendas, and how are decisions made to adopt innovative policy alternatives? Explicitly, there is a missing link between motivations and a policy practice of innovation. The dynamics of local policy innovation have been either neglected or simplified as rational calculus of local leaders. Since policy innovation involves a complex process of bridging an innovative idea to decision makers, fighting against competing interests and legitimatizing through a series of procedures, the role of policy entrepreneurs, those who invest their resources (i.e., time, energy, and reputation) in promoting a significant policy change, is extremely important. Despite considerable debate in Western scholarship, the policy entrepreneur framework has seldom been applied to China. Among the very few exceptions, emphases have been given to policy entrepreneurs out of government offices, such as experts, think tanks, and social organizations. However, given the authoritarian nature of the Chinese political system, policy entrepreneurs within the state in the policy-making process play a crucial role and should be given more emphasis.

This article attempts to fill the gap by focusing on a proximate