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Policy Entrepreneurship under Hierarchy:

How state actors change policies in China*

Chunyu Shi Emilie Frenkiel

Abstract

How do actors develop entrepreneurial activities to bring about policy change? To what extent do the contexts in which they are embedded shape their behaviors? Relying on three comparative case studies, we use the structure-, institution- and agent-based analytical framework to investigate the complex and dynamic interactions between contexts and actors in the process of policy change initiated by state actors in authoritarian China. We propose a conceptual framework, “policy entrepreneurship under hierarchy”, which highlights the influence of power domination during the policy change process. It allows us to offer a renewed definition of policy entrepreneur and to identify a pattern of successful policy entrepreneurship in contrast to the “four central elements” suggested by Mintrom and Nomann. We conclude that hierarchical policy entrepreneurship in China is displayed through two kinds of relationships: the *proposal-approval* between policy entrepreneurs and their superiors and the *instruction-execution* between policy entrepreneurs and their subordinates.

Key words

Policy entrepreneurship; Policy entrepreneur; Contexts; Local cadres; Power domination

Policy entrepreneurship refers to the activities undertaken by actors who leverage resources to create new or transform existing policies. For scholars over the past few decades, the use of this concept as a new perspective for understanding and theorizing the dynamics of the policy change process in a variety of contexts has been an important trend.

Existing policy entrepreneurship studies could be summarized as comprising three major trends. The first trend gathers biographical studies which focus on the analysis of the role played by entrepreneurs in the process of production and implementation of new policy ideas. Entrepreneurs are considered as heroic and decisive figures for a given successful policy change (Zhu & Xiao, 2015; Hammond, 2013; Schneider and Teske, 1992). The second trend focuses on the motivations and behaviors of entrepreneurs during the policy innovation process. Relying heavily on the rational choice theory model, researchers of this current see policy entrepreneurs as rational agents acting strategically in the pursuit of certain interests (Beckert, 1999; Fligstein, 2001; Greenwood and Suddaby 2006; Lawrence and Phillips 2004; Levy and Scully 2007, Zhu, 2008; Hammond, 2013; Zhu & Xiao, 2015). Entrepreneurial actions are thus characterized as planned, intentional and

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strategic. Both trends have the tendency to overemphasize the role of actors and underestimate the influence of structural and institutional contexts during the changing process.

Different from the first two tendencies, the third one argues that ‘no entrepreneur alone will ever be enough to cause policy reform; we always require an account of the context’ (Ackrill, Kay & Zahariadis, 2013: 879) and ‘agency and context ... should not be viewed in isolation but as linked through strategy’ (Zahariadis & Exadaktylos, 2016: 62). Based on institutional theory, this trend concerns the process of policy entrepreneurship and the ways in which the broader context can affect the policy entrepreneurs’ activities and behaviors, and in return, how these entrepreneurs shape, change, and consolidate political institutions and the flow of politics in their specific policy contexts. Authors in this current try to link individual actors with organizational or societal structures, to explain how and why embedded agency can create and develop new institutional norms or rules and become well established over time (Dacin et al. 2002; DiMaggio 1988; North 1990; Scott 1994; Battilana et al. 2009). Our approach is in line with this trend.

With the propagation of the concept, some Chinese studies have also mobilized the concept of policy entrepreneurship to explain the emergence and practices of entrepreneurial actors in bringing about new policies in the Chinese context. Some scholars are interested in state actors (Child et al. 2007; Hammond 2013; Zhu 2012, 2014, 2016; Teets 2015; Teets et al., 2017; He 2018) because they play a dominant role in the policy-making process (Zhu, 2012), whereas others are more interested in non-state actors (Zhu 2008; Mertha 2009; Almen 2016), highlighting the dynamic involvement of societal forces in the Chinese policy-making process. Analyses mostly focus on the attributes of policy entrepreneurs and the strategies that they adopt to lead to successful policy change. These studies have shed important light on the dynamism of policy experimentations and innovations in China¹, helping to modify the stereotyped image of authoritarian regimes, which are usually considered rigid and monolithic (He, 2018; Hammond, 2013).

Despite their theoretical and empirical contributions, existing studies on Chinese policy entrepreneurship present some limitations. First, like the earlier western researches, the role of actors has been overemphasized (He, 2018). Although a few studies have paid attention to the Chinese institutional context, scholars usually use a loose theoretical framework without adaptation to analyze Chinese policy entrepreneurship, and the nuances between the behaviors of actors from different institutional arrangements have been somewhat neglected (Zhu, 2014; Hammond, 2013). In fact, if we recognize that policy entrepreneurship is a “context-specific activity” (Ackrill & Kay 2011; Mintrom & Norman 2009), policy entrepreneurs are always embedded in specific structural and institutional contexts. Structures and institutions influence actors’ cognitions and actions in important ways, and the case of China might present some contrasts or at least some nuances compared to policy entrepreneurship in democratic countries. Related studies need to further

investigate these nuances to better understand how and to what extent entrepreneurial activities are shaped by specific contexts.

A second limitation is due to the fact that the influence of the Chinese Communist Party and political power domination has rarely been discussed by existing studies. However, in an investigation conducted by Chen and Yang (2009), 68% of local cadres (365 interviewees in total) said that the support of superior leadership constituted the most important condition for the successful enforcement of a new policy. These findings lead us to pose two questions: in this Party-state authoritarian regime, to what extent and how does hierarchical power shape actors' behaviors? Additionally, what is the influence of the Party, especially that of its mandated agents—the Party secretaries—in the policy change process? Few studies have taken into account these critical questions.

This article aims to address these questions. We attempt to closely describe and analyze Chinese policy entrepreneurship patterns. To achieve this objective, we use the structure-, institution- and agent-based (SIA) framework to understand and explain how specific structures and institutions shape the behaviors of policy entrepreneurs and how actors take advantage of contextual conditions and overcome constraining conditions to bring about policy changes. The title of this article is inspired by a concept proposed by Sebastian Heilmann, namely, “experimentation under hierarchy”, which describes “a process of policy generation that legitimizes local initiative while maintaining ultimate hierarchical control” (Heilmann 2008, p.1). In this article, we further develop this concept by highlighting the bidirectional power domination in the process of policy entrepreneurship. We point out that the hierarchical control not only exists between policy entrepreneurs and their superiors, it can also exist between the policy entrepreneurs and officials under their authority, who are in charge of implementing the new policies. We name the first relationship as *proposal-approval* and the second as *instruction-execution*.

Given the important role played by social and political positions in the process of policy entrepreneurship, which can largely influence agents' actions and strategies that they undertake, in order to limit the complexity of our work, this study only analyzes policy entrepreneurs with formal power and resource control, namely state actors. In that sense, this article does not pretend to provide a general theoretical model about the relationship between policy entrepreneurs and the contexts they are embedded in. It attempts to illustrate some contrasts presented by the Chinese public policy entrepreneurship and bring about some nuances and complements to the existing findings and conclusions.

The article is organized as follows. First, we offer a global theoretical discussion of the SIA framework that permits us to delimit the determinant factors that enable or constrain the emergence of policy entrepreneurship. We then present the methods adopted by this study. In this section, we

also detail our three case studies. Then, relying on the SIA framework, we analyze how Chinese policy entrepreneurs interact with the structural and institutional contexts in which they are embedded and how these contexts shape these state actors' behaviors. In this section, we investigate the actions of Chinese policy entrepreneurs by highlighting their specificity in contrast to the four central elements of successful policy entrepreneurship suggested by Mintrom and Norman (2009).

1. Determinants of policy entrepreneurship: The structure-, institution- and agent-based framework

Many empirical and theoretical studies emphasize the importance of the variety of conditions that enable or constrain the emergence of policy entrepreneurship. Affecting factors have been identified as ranging from the qualities and characteristics of actors to the contexts in which they are embedded. These factors span multiple layers. The macrolevel contexts are structures that define the "broader material and cultural contexts within which actors and institutions are embedded" (Bakir 2017, p.226) and institutions that guide and regulate the behaviors of agents through the logic of appropriateness or instrumentality (Campbell, 2004). The microlevel factors refer to, on the one hand, the qualities and characteristics of actors and, on the other hand, the strategies used by them and the social and political positions that they occupy (Maguire, Hardy and Lawrence, 2004).

1.1. Structures

Structures constitute external factors that enable the agents' actions to create new policies or institutions (Oliver, 1992). Environmental changes such as national institutional restructuring, the rise of crises and social problems can produce functional or political pressures that call into question the legitimacy, validity and relevance of existing policies and institutions. These pressures prompt individuals or organizations to seek alternatives to deal with the crises of legitimacy or power (Fligstein and Mara-Drita 1996; Phillips, Lawrence and Hardy 2000).

The characteristics of the field under scrutiny also play an important role in the emergence of policy entrepreneurship. Transitional societies with poorly coordinated structures and uncertain environments are more likely to breed policy and institutional innovations (Maguire, Hardy and Lawrence 2004). The reason is that in premature fields, the institutional order is not completely developed and the political and social structures are unstable. Resistance to change might not be as important as in established fields (Greenwood and Hinings, 1996). For example, in the case of China, some scholars find that clashes between elite leaders (Nathan, 1973; Tsou, 1976) and the fragmentation of political and administrative structures (Lieberthal 1992; Andrew 2009) produce political plurality and create opportunities and room for policy entrepreneurs to bargain and negotiate policy developments.

1.2. Institutions

Embedded in specific structures, institutions can also be considered enabling or constraining factors for the emergence of an eventual change action (March and Olsen, 2008). In general, lower degrees of institutionalization can provide agents with opportunities to break through existing rules and to take strategic actions to bring about change (DiMaggio, 1988; Fligstein 1997; Phillips, Lawrence and Hardy 2000). In a less institutionalized field, the boundaries between behaviors that are allowed and not allowed are unclear, which gives rise to opportunities for actors to take risks and to take the initiative to make change and alter the status quo.

Notably, however, low levels of institutionalization are a double-edged sword. They provide opportunities for policy change, while change process is more susceptible to being influenced by human factors, such as the will, judgments and preferences of decision makers. If these authorities do not support innovative projects, new policies will be unable to result in successful outcomes.

1.3. Agents

Here, agents refer to policy entrepreneurs. They are actors who are “willing to invest their resources in return for future policies they favor” (Kingdon, 1995, p.124). Policy entrepreneurs initiate diverse changes and actively participate in the implementation of these changes (Roberts and King, 1991); they are key actors in promoting policy innovations (Polsby, 1984; Mintrom, 1997, 2000; Mintrom & Norman, 2009). Structures and institutions are very important external factors but cannot constitute sufficient enabling conditions for the emergence of policy entrepreneurship, and the policy change process largely depends on the characteristics and skills of policy entrepreneurs (Kingdon, 1984; Mintrom & Norman, 2009; Bakir, 2017). On the one hand, their social and political status is emphasized, while on the other hand, the strategies that they use are emphasized.

1.3.1. The status dimension

The social or political status held by the policy entrepreneurs within a field determines their access to resources and their capacity to engage in policy entrepreneurship (Schneider & Teske, 1992; Lawrence, 1999; Maguire, Hardy and Lawrence, 2004). Those agents with high status possess superior resources, the formal authority to legitimize their ideas, or strong social capital to mobilize allies, and they are usually better able to use their advantaged position to develop and impose their ideas and rules (North, 1990; Battilana, 2006). For actors situated in the lower layers of the social or political hierarchy, existing rules usually do not confer sufficient resources to undertake innovative actions on them, but they might try to convince actors who hold a higher status to endorse their projects.

1.3.2. The strategy dimension

Multiple skills and strategies are needed for actors to drive successful policy entrepreneurship. A widely adopted framework was put forward by Mintrom and Norman (2009). They posit that four elements are central to policy entrepreneurship: displaying social acuity, defining problems,

building teams, and leading by example. *Displaying social acuity* means that policy entrepreneurs demonstrate high levels of ability to identify "windows of opportunity" (Kingdon,1995) for introducing new policies within the existing social order. It requires actors to be particularly adept at understanding others and engaging in policy conversations. *Defining problems* is a political act that involves a set of framing activities undertaken to expose crises and problems with current policy settings to draw support from actors beyond the immediate scope of the problems. *Building teams* refers to the fact that policy entrepreneurs mobilize allies, operate within a tight-knit team composed of individuals with different knowledge and skills, and use their personal and professional social networks to obtain strong support in the pursuit of change. Furthermore, a successful policy entrepreneur needs to work with coalitions to promote policy change. *Leading by example* means that policy entrepreneurs take an idea and that they themselves translate it into action to demonstrate the effectiveness and practicality of the new project; hence, they can win credibility with others and reduce the perception of risk among decision makers.

According to the two Mintrom and Norman, all policy entrepreneurs exhibit these characteristics at least to some degree, and those whose features correspond to these skills are more likely to succeed than those whose features do not. Meanwhile, they recognize that policy entrepreneurs are embedded in social contexts and that it is possible for a given policy entrepreneur to use strategies that are different from those they that have suggested (Mintrom and Norman, 2009). This means that contexts matter and that structural and institutional conditions influence actors' strategic choices. In the case of China, given the hierarchical and coercive characteristics of the Chinese authoritarian system, we can reasonably suggest that the strategies adopted by Chinese actors should present some specific traits compared to those displayed by their counterparts in democratic regimes. For instance, as the top-down hierarchical order dominates the process of all types of political and administrative operation, to realize their new projects, policy entrepreneurs will not build any type of team or take any type of audience as the target of persuasion to legitimize their idea and to obtain support; they will more probably turn to those who possess formal power and authority to *build teams* and *define problems*.

2. Methods and case studies

2.1 Methodology

This article embraces the case study approach. Although case studies are sometimes criticized due to their lack of generalizability and representativeness (Devine, 2002; George & Bennett, 2004; Flyvbjerg, 2006; Thomas, 2011), we argue that case studies have merits and strengths. As Hammond (2013, p.124) has pointed out, a case study can provide "a richness of detail and description that is otherwise impossible to achieve". In this way, a case study might also be a good approach for testing

the reliability of some conceptual or theoretical frameworks and eventually improve them with the detailed findings presented in the research.

Promoting citizen participation has constituted one of the pivots of political reform in China since 1990 (Nathan, 2003; Shambaugh, 2008; Heberer, 2016; Ahlers, 2019). There are two paths for its implementation: reforms in the electoral system and democratic reforms in the public decision process (Kennedy & Chen, 2014; Wang and Ma, 2015). The three cases selected in this paper represent these two types of policy innovation. Among them, the direct election in Buyun belongs to the first type (He & Lang, 2001; Li, 2002), while the “honest talk” in Wenling (Fishkin, 2009; He, 2011) and the “social deliberation” in Pengzhou belong to the second type. Although the two types of innovations all present different levels of delicacy, political reforms such as direct elections are always more sensitive because they could threaten the power monopoly of the Chinese Communist Party and, therefore, the change process will be more complicated and convoluted. However, given that they are all embedded in and shaped by the same macro institutional arrangement and political culture, different types of reform behaviors can share common logics, which we attempt to explore in this study.

All three cases have drawn great attention from central authorities and academics. Media coverage, national and international observers have portrayed these three cases as bold political innovations, with national implications. We have chosen to focus on three cases of local institutional innovations which are not representative of policy innovation in China. On the contrary, all three have been considered exceptional and unique cases of bold experimentations with citizen participation. Our hypothesis is that the investigation of extreme cases may enhance our understanding of the pattern and process of policy innovation and entrepreneurship. We have also selected these three cases as they have been well-documented, accessible and fairly assessable. Buyun has been a constant reference as the boldest electoral reform and Wenling has been the pioneer and main reference for participatory and deliberative devices, especially as regards participatory budgeting, sortition and deliberative polling. Pengzhou is a later experiment with less fame which has nonetheless played a role in shaping what has become the widest institutionalization of participatory budgeting in China, since it affects all of the villages and urban communities in Chengdu (more than 16 million inhabitants).

A change agent’s political position constitutes a major factor. So as to better explain the extent to which political power matters in the policy change process in an authoritarian regime, the three policy entrepreneurs selected in our studies have different statuses: the first one is a local Party secretary, the second is a local executive leader while the third one is an ordinary local cadre without a leadership position. By distinguishing the political status of policy entrepreneurs, we can investigate, on the one hand, their common behavior logics and, on the other hand, their different

experiences, given their distinct political positions.

The findings presented in this study are based on primary and secondary data that were collected between 2012 and 2020 in Wenling and Chengdu. In-depth non-randomized individual and collective qualitative interviews were conducted with academics and local government officials in local government facilities, university campuses and local cafés. Except for the five principal actors that we present in the article, interviewees also included nine other local officials at various levels in three sub-provincial jurisdictions involved in the innovation process as decision-makers or policy implementers. These long and fairly open interviews with officials have helped us retrace the trajectory of policy entrepreneurs as well as the different steps and strategies they adopted to promote innovation.

In Wenling, 14 semi-directed interviews were conducted with cadres from the propaganda department, township governments, village party secretaries and representatives as well as local scholars. In Chengdu, 23 semi-directed interviews were conducted with cadres of the United Front department (in Pengzhou and Chongzhou), village party secretaries, village representatives and local scholars consulted in the process. Each interview lasted for one to three hours. On top of these, some interviewees have been interviewed several more times over the years. We have also relied on written documentation: newspapers, website contents, and brochures/promotional materials produced and published by local governments, works in English and Chinese by experts who describe their consulting work and research.

2.2 The Three Empirical Examples

Case 1: Direct election in Buyun county²

Buyun is a rural county under the Zhong district located in Sichuan province. Experimentation with the direct election of the county mayor was initiated at the end of 1998 by the local Party secretary, Zhang Jinming. This political innovation invited Buyun residents to elect their mayor by universal suffrage, and candidacy was open to any local resident beyond 18 with 30 supporting signatures.

At the end of the 1990s, as the Jiang Zemin-Zhu Rongji government praised local democracy, an important political debate took place on the topic of the direct election of county and township mayors. Before the direct election experimentation, Zhang Jinming had initiated another reform, namely, the “open selection” of county-level mayors³. The objective of this reform was to prevent corruption by local cadres and, therefore, to improve the relationship between cadres and residents, which was very bad at that time. When Li Fan, the son of a top official and Beijing-based NGO leader, heard of this institutional reform, he contacted Secretary Zhang and advised her to carry out a direct election experimentation in her district. He told her that if the reform was successful, it would be comparable to the Xiaogang village reform, which has been credited with initiating

economic reforms in China.⁴ Since neither the Constitution nor the electoral law stipulated the direct election of county- and township-level mayors, such experimentation could be considered illegal and unconstitutional. However, the main leaders of the central government had divergent opinions on direct elections, and some of them had privately expressed support for this reform.⁵ In addition, previous institutional innovations had transgressed the law but were later recognized and legitimized by the central authorities. For example, the reform of the household contract responsibility system initiated by Xiaogang village went against the planned economic policy at that time, but it was later approved by Deng Xiaoping, and this innovation became a milestone in China's economic reform. Both factors gave some local cadres the imagination and courage to carry out institutional innovations: the political risk was indisputable, but if successful, the outcomes of the reform would also be manifest and could earn the cadres a significant professional promotion. Party Secretary Zhang therefore decided to undertake the pioneering experimentation with Li Fan as a consultant and expert who would accompany her throughout the reform.

Experimentation was conducted discretely. To avoid possible trouble with higher authorities or public opinion, Zhang constrained her Party committee to verbally agree to keep the whole direct election process secret. The location of the experiment also reflected their prudence. Buyun, a 16,000-inhabitant county that is remote and quite cut off from the outside world, was chosen by her team because it allowed information to be confined to Buyun's territory only.

The final winner of the two-round election was the candidate supported by Zhang and her Party committee. The election result was then validated by the local people's congress. However, despite the observed discretion, a journalist of the *Southern Weekend* reported the experimentation, which triggered fierce debate nationwide. Although the mayor elected in 1998 kept his position, three years later, a document issued by the National People's Congress forbade any further county-level direct elections. Zhang Jinming was promoted to vice-mayor in another city in Sichuan, where she was deprived of strategic functions. Li Fan continued to promote democratic reforms to local governments, but he largely focused on deliberative mechanisms from then on. As a result, in 2005, he became the advisor to a reform-minded cadre in Wenling district in Zhejiang province, which is our second case study.

Case 2: "Honest talk" in Wenling

Wenling is a coastal district-level city located in Zhejiang province. The deliberative mechanism named "honest talk" by local officials derives from education sessions for farmers in the 1990s. These propaganda meetings were unpopular among villagers, which led the government department in charge, Wenling's propaganda department, to transform these meetings for educating the masses into grievance meetings. These meetings gained traction among local residents. The first

institutional deliberative designs emerged in 2000 and proved efficient in diminishing petitions. As a result, “honest talk” was gradually extended to all public sectors and administrative levels in Wenling.

Back in 2000, Chen Yimin, now credited for having created grassroots deliberative democracy in Wenling, was a junior local cadre who served as his superiors’ lieutenant in promoting deliberation. When they retired, Chen was appointed by the local government to take charge of it, but he did not succeed in becoming the head of the propaganda department, and Wenling’s main leaders did not participate in the innovation process, which has severely constrained his work in the following years. Because he lacked sufficient formal authority over his counterparts, some localities refused to implement his innovative project when the main leaders thought that “honest talk” was “useless” and constituted a “waste of time”.⁶ However, Chen Yimin benefitted from outside support, including famous scholars and social organizations. In 2005, with the help of Li Fan and another Chinese scholar, He Baogang⁷, Chen Yimin experimented with the first participatory budgeting experimentations in China in two Wenling townships: Xinhe and Zeguo (Frenkiel, 2020).

During Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao’s second mandate (2007-2012), the central authority officially promoted “citizens’ orderly participation”, which granted formal legitimacy to participatory and deliberative innovations in Wenling. Taking advantage of the favorable political climate, Chen Yimin consequently succeeded in establishing participatory budgeting at all levels of government in Wenling. He simultaneously persuaded the authorities of the district to include the result of the yearly organization of deliberations in the evaluation system for the main local officials, which affects their income and career promotion decisively. This strategy has partly compensated for the constraints generated by his inferior position in the political hierarchy when his counterparts resisted organizing “honest talk”.

Case 3: Deliberation and social dialogue in Pengzhou

Pengzhou is a district-level city located north of Chengdu in Sichuan province. Like most suburban cities, it is surrounded by heavy industries, leading to acute environmental unrest in recent years. With the acceleration of urbanization, the massive sale of collective rural land has also triggered conflicts between the local government, farmers and industries. Chengdu city’s former Party secretary, Li Chuncheng, had set up village and urban councils to alleviate social tensions. However, because of their limited autonomy due to excessive intervention by the government, these village councils could not solve problems effectively, and the need to create efficient alternatives was put on the agenda⁸. In this context, the “deliberation and social dialogue system” emerged in Pengzhou in 2014 and was subsequently acknowledged by the Central Committee of the Party.,

The key actor in creating this deliberative mechanism was the head of Pengzhou’s United Front

department⁹, Yao Minshuang. Yao had never heard of deliberative democracy before 2012, and it was during a training session for local officials that he learned about this concept from Huang Guohua, a professor of the Party school of Sichuan. Huang predicted in the training sessions that the promotion of deliberative democracy would be one of the focuses of political reform under the Xi Jinping-Li Keqiang government.¹⁰

After further consultation with Huang on deliberative democracy, Yao Minshuang decided to promote deliberative practices in Pengzhou. His main objective was to increase the influence of the local United Front by endowing it with new functions. Yao invited Huang to be his consultant. Then, he sought to gain the support of Pengzhou's Party secretary, the top official in the local power structure. The latter was persuaded by two arguments made by Yao¹¹:

I told him, this innovative project was the first in China; if it succeeded, it would become famous throughout China and constitute an important local government achievement, which would be attributed to the secretary; if it triggered undesirable political trouble, I would take full responsibility for it.

The Party secretary eventually granted his consent. Subsequently, Yao set up a working team composed of the heads of various local government departments and chaired by the Party secretary. The team's mission was to put democratic deliberation into practice in Pengzhou's townships, counties and villages. In the process, Yao also benefitted from the support of the head of Chengdu city's United Front department, who encouraged the United Front department of Chongzhou, another district of Chengdu, to promote deliberative practices in its jurisdiction.

Pengzhou's innovation attracted the attention of central organs. The United Front at the central level visited Pengzhou to understand its practices; official organizations such as the Central Party school and the Compilation and Translation Bureau also attended village councils several times. As a result, when the Central Committee of the Party called for suggestions concerning measures to promote deliberative democracy in China, Huang Guohua drafted a report to summarize Pengzhou's experimentation, which was transmitted to the Central Committee of the Party through a scholar working in the Compilation and Translation Bureau. According to Huang, the ideas he advanced were largely welcomed by the Central Committee and served as the basis of the famous Party circular known as Document Number Three¹², which was designed to promote local deliberative practices in China. Thus, Pengzhou's innovation became a centrally ratified model that could be expanded to the whole country.

3. Understanding Chinese Policy Entrepreneurship

How do Chinese state actors develop entrepreneurial activities, to what extent do the structural and institutional contexts in which they are embedded shape their behaviors? To what extent the Chinese

policy entrepreneurship differs from policy entrepreneurship in democratic countries? To answer these questions, we mobilize a context contingent, dynamic and integrative framework joining interactions between structures, institutions and agents to precisely understand the policy entrepreneurship in an authoritarian political system like China's.

3.1. Structures: A convergence of local crises and national political opportunities

Crises and field-level problems might generate functional and political pressures that lead actors to introduce new ideas to respond to the crises. As observed in the three case studies, Chinese policy entrepreneurship often emerges to solve specific social and political problems. In the Buyun case, faced with the rampant corruption of officials and the increasing grievances of local people, unlike their counterparts in richer regions, Buyun leaders could not initiate reforms in public service, as this poor district had a small budget. To improve the relations between the government and the people to alleviate residents' protests, Zhang Jinming initiated a direct election experimentation that freed her financial constraints¹³. In the Wenling case, the cadres responsible for propaganda found it impossible to mobilize residents to support their work if they stuck to their former working methods, which allowed the "honest talk" to emerge¹⁴. In Pengzhou, as the United Front became increasingly marginalized in the local power structure because of institutional reforms launched by the central authorities, the objective of Yao's innovation was specifically to endow this organization with more functions to intervene in local governance, thus reinforcing its functional and political influence¹⁵:

If the United Front department does something influential, then its status will change throughout the country. In the past, the United Front department has been marginalized, if it carries the deliberation in township, its role and influence will change.

Another enabling structural factor in the three cases was the political climate at the time, which provided favorable conditions for policy and institutional innovations (Teets & Hurst, 2014; Göbel & Heberer, 2017). Political information and policies issued by the central government had, to some degree, encouraged local cadres to undertake some kinds of reforms. In fact, since the end of the 1990s, the promotion of local democracy and, subsequently, deliberative democracy "with Chinese characteristics" had been imposed by the central authorities as one important mission to accomplish, which generated fierce competitions between organizations and regions in the policy implementation process (He & Warren, 2011; Wang & Ma, 2015). For local cadres, promoting political participation constitutes a strategy of "killing two birds with one stone": on the one hand, this kind of reform could help them deal with the crisis they faced; on the other hand, as the promotion of Chinese cadres is decided by their superiors, for local cadres, promoting policy and institutional innovations in areas encouraged by the central authorities might constitute a good way of demonstrating to superior officials their outstanding capacities and performance (Heberer &

Trappel, 2013; Göbel & Heberer, 2017). However, since the legitimacy of a policy innovation is approved by the central authorities but not the law, and the criteria is usually vague and unpredictable, local cadres still sometimes run the high political risk of undertaking bold reform which could make them later be blamed for having crossed a line (Zheng, 2007).

3.2. Institutions: The predominance of the Party and the “administrative subcontract” system

Structures exert their influences through institutional arrangements. There are two elements that distinguish the institutional arrangements in China from those in other countries. It is crucial to take them into account before undertaking comparative political analyses. The first is the pivotal role of the Communist Party in the Chinese political system while the second is related to the special relationship between the central and local governments. These elements are the common institutional context of all governments and largely shape their actions.

The Party’s leadership role is enshrined in the Chinese Constitution. It directs all state institutions and exercises close control over all aspects of the system. It is the game master of all institutional mechanisms and is attentive to quickly eliminating any attempt at reform if it threatens its monopoly on political power (Cabestan, 2014). The leading role of the Party lies in the determination of political decisions, the selection of cadres, the direction of political and social ideology and the direction of administrative affairs. The Party exercises its domination and influence through Party committees, which are directed by a secretary, who is the most powerful person in the power structure (Landry, 2008; Zheng, 2010). He or she has absolute authority over others within his or her hierarchical echelon, and all new policies must obtain his or her consent before being legitimized by law.

The Chinese institutional arrangement is also characterized by the paradoxical combination of political centralization and economic-administrative decentralization. This special central-local government relationship is depicted as an “administrative subcontract” system by the economist Zhou (2014): the appointing power of cadres is centralized in the central and higher-echelon governments, and they have unlimited power to intervene in and veto on the decisions of local or lower-level governments. Meanwhile, the former provides great discretion over local governance issues to the latter, and local governments are responsible for economic and social development within their respective jurisdiction (Zheng, 2007). The central and higher-level governments exercise their political control through a result-oriented evaluation system: tasks assigned to local governments are often judged based on their results, regardless of their strict abiding by legal procedures or rules throughout the execution process (Zhou, 2014; Brodsgaard, 2004; Edin, 2004). This peculiar institutional arrangement has generated a paradoxical phenomenon: on the one hand, the administrative decentralization and result-oriented evaluation system grant important discretion

to local cadres in dealing with specific local affairs, giving them ample room to promote policy and institutional changes (Heberer and Schubert, 2012; Fewsmith 2013; Teets 2015, Teets, Hasmath and Lewis, 2017); on the other hand, because of the unlimited interventions by higher authorities, local innovations often lack legal protection, which increases the political uncertainty and risks run by policy entrepreneurs.

The Chinese institutional arrangement and practice allow policy entrepreneurs to navigate their way through the institutional ambiguities and take risks. It also constitutes a strong factor which influences the actors' imagination, strategy, and room for maneuver. The Buyun case is a case in point, as the institutional innovation was carried out by the local Party secretary herself, which endowed the reform with important formal authority in its earlier stages, and explained why the direct election experimentation could be quickly and successfully implemented without any difficulties at the local level. However, as this reform might have weakened the Party's absolute control over the local government, it was deemed to have crossed the Party's political bottom line, and as a result, was later suspended.

3.3. Profiles and typology of policy entrepreneurs

The three policy entrepreneurs described in our study share common personality traits. They are often pragmatic and competent mid-level officials with a good grasp of their constituency's social situation. They know where the social tensions and trouble lie and propose efficient solutions within their realm of competence. They represent a community of local cadres who are open-minded, dynamic, clever, and audacious, who dare take risks, and who are capable of grasping the essence of central Party documents and initiate policy innovations with different objectives (Lewis, Teets, and Hasmath, 2017). They also surround themselves with academics who play the role of confidant and gray eminence. Such is the case of Huang Guohua for Yao Minshuang and of Li Fan for Zhang Jinming and Chen Yimin. All of these characteristics correspond to the quality described by Mintrom and Norman (2009) as "social acuity".

However, policy entrepreneurs are far from homogeneous. First, even if they are all mid-level officials, their political position varies from one to another. Some hold crucial and strategic positions, while others hold more trivial positions. Given that an individual's power is contingent upon resources and given that one's position is one element in the measure of power (Pfeffer, 1981), political positions can be a major factor affecting policy entrepreneurs' capacity to mobilize resources and to efficiently implement their innovative ideas. In our three cases, Zhang Jinming was a local Party secretary who held the position of local political leadership. Yao Minshuang was an executive responsible for the local United Front; he was a so-called executive entrepreneur. Their positions endowed both of them with substantial power while Chen Yimin was a mid-level cadre

without major responsibilities. Their differing political statuses lead to distinct experiences in the process of implementing the new policies. Relying on their official authority, both Zhang and Yao could impose their ideas and policies on lower-level cadres without obvious resistance, while in Chen’s case, cadres of his rank could ignore his policies because his political status did not grant him sufficient authority to compel them to implement his ideas.

Second, the role that they play in the policy change process can vary greatly. Change agents can fall into two categories, namely, field makers and field takers. The former emerge in early stages and actively take the initiative to create a new innovative field. A field maker may be involved in the whole process of policy and institutional innovation but can quit this process and leave the field to others. An agent in the position of taking the field built by his or her predecessors and who continues to adopt new practices and new changes is a field taker. In our three cases, Zhang Jinming and Yao Minshuang are field makers: not only did they initiate an innovative idea and design and implement that idea in practice, but the innovations that they introduced also constituted a break with the previous policy. Their innovative actions facilitated the emergence of the bifurcation point for policy change, thus opening up a new field change. We consider Chen Yimin to be a field taker. Chen had certainly participated in the first deliberative experiments in Wenling district, but initiatives and important change actions had been undertaken by his superiors¹⁶. Only after Wenling authorities put him in charge of the “honest talk” did Chen Yimin become a central figure in continuing deliberative reforms. His case has helped us unearth another type of policy entrepreneur that is absent in the existing literature: the *mandated entrepreneur*. Mandated entrepreneurs are innovative cadres who prove efficient in the change field that their hierarchical superiors assigned them to reform.

Table 1. The typology of Chinese public policy entrepreneurs

| Typology | Definition | Political status | Role | Type of initiator |
|------------------------|--|------------------|-------------|-------------------------------------|
| Political Entrepreneur | Individuals hold political leadership positions | Party Secretary | Field maker | Upstream (and downstream) initiator |
| Executive Entrepreneur | Individuals hold executive leadership positions | Executive chief | Field maker | Upstream (and downstream) initiator |
| Mandated Entrepreneur | Individuals are designated by their superiors to undertake reforms | Any Cadre | Field taker | Downstream initiator |

3.4. Strategy pattern of Chinese policy entrepreneurs

Given the pivotal role played by the Party secretary in the power structure and the hierarchical relationship between cadres in different governmental echelons, strategies used by Chinese state actors to lead a successful policy change present some contrasts comparing to the four elements put forward by Mintrom and Norman. They are summarized as follow: Chinese policy entrepreneurs look for building official authority, restricting the field of action, using hierarchical dominance and surrounding themselves with expert advisors.

Building official authority

Official authority refers to the sanctioned right given to actors to make decisions, give orders and obtain obedience from others. Authority confers systemic power to actors to influence events and other people's beliefs and actions. It can help policy entrepreneurs legitimize their innovative ideas, promote recognition, obtain support and cooperation, and overcome resistance and opposition. There are three ways for policy entrepreneurs to build official authority. First, authority is always attached to political positions. People holding high political positions, such as the Party secretary in China, systematically possess official authority. Second, policy entrepreneurs mobilize other actors who possess official authority to legitimize and endorse their change projects. Third, they create restricting rules or regulations to impose authority. In a society where the degree of institutionalization is low, the authority stemming from political positions might nonetheless be more effective than that deriving from rules or laws. **This is what professor Huang Guohua has insisted:**

The local Party committee should lead, involve in and coordinate the innovative process. Under a political system like China's, policy innovations could not be achieved without the participation and the support of the "the Number one"(yibashou), even if it happens, the innovation will encounter many difficulties. Local leading cadres should not stay out of the process. Only when there are requirements from above (Shangmian) can underlings(Xiamian) be motivated and cooperate with the innovation.(Huang guohua, 17 May 2016)

Therefore, in China, to build official authority, policy entrepreneurs will first seek the support of the Party secretary. As the latter is the embodiment of the absolute direction of the Party, his or her support signifies the Party's approval of the innovation, conferring official legitimacy upon it. This institutional arrangement leads Chinese policy entrepreneurs to try to persuade the Party secretary and to obtain his or her support before launching any further change actions. Without it, no policy change can take place.

Nevertheless, obtaining the support and commitment of the Party secretary is only the first important step towards successful policy change. To fight the resistance of some local cadres, to

overcome all kinds of unexpected hardship and to mobilize all the necessary resources to put innovative ideas into practice, policy entrepreneurs must also build a work team with sufficient authority and power. A common solution for them is to invite and persuade local executive chiefs to take part in the innovation and to build an innovative team. This is what happened in Pengzhou and Buyun but not in Wenling. As a result of the absence of participation of these powerful local cadres, Chen's innovative team was weak. Consequently, the "honest talk" was suspended in some counties in Wenling when a newly arrived county leader (holding the same rank as Chen Yimin) doubted the benefits of this mechanism¹⁷. In contrast, in Pengzhou, because Yao Minshuang had successfully persuaded the Party secretary, the mayor and other main executive officials to join his team, he did not meet significant resistance from the cadres who were charged with implementing his innovative project. Moreover, as they relied on the support of the Party secretary and the mayor, it was quickly institutionalized and diffused in all administrative echelons of Pengzhou district.

Restricting the field of action

Compared to their counterparts in democratic countries and non-state actors, the actions of Chinese state actors do not take place in the public sphere; rather, they are confined to a very limited politico-administrative sphere. Even when there is an opening to the public and to other actors, it is limited to experts or scholars with specific expertise who can serve as consultants in the policy change process.

We know that obtaining the support of the Party secretary is the decisive step for policy entrepreneurs. Once an innovative project is drafted with the help of consultants, its implementation relies on the formal authority held by the policy entrepreneur. Despite being highly important to non-state policy entrepreneurs and to those in democratic countries, deploying persuasive strategies in the public sphere is neither crucial nor necessary for Chinese state agents in some cases. Deploying such strategies is not required to justify the legitimacy of the innovative project or to convince opponents through public persuasion. In the cases presented in this study, none of the three policy entrepreneurs were engaged in public persuasion strategies. As a matter of fact, they only needed to convince the Party secretary and the main local executive chiefs to support their innovative project. Other actors might have been involved, such as the cadres in charge of the implementation of the new policy, but they do not constitute important targets of persuasion in a hierarchical regime. Once the main local authorities give their consent, the innovative project is imposed under political and administrative order in the name of the local Party committee and government.

Therefore, in the Chinese institutional context, the policy entrepreneurship undertaken by state actors usually takes place in a semi-closed field where public discourse and debates are nonexistent. This is all the more the case if the reform is still in the experimentation stage, with uncertain

outcomes and impact, and reports and coverage by the media are not welcomed. Policy entrepreneurs tend to keep the reform secret from the public, particularly from journalists. Buyun is a case in point. As the reform contained high political risks, Secretary Zhang forced all involved actors to keep the reform secret to superior government to avoid any adverse factors of external interference¹⁸. Moreover, *In order to keep the reform confidential, except journalists from local TV and radio stations or newspapers, she required that non-local journalists not be allowed to cover the matter, and that only 5 press cards would be issued, journalists without press cards would not be received*¹⁹.

为了保密,她要求除了本区的电视台、电台和报社的记者外,不让外来的记者采访这件事。规定只发5个记者证,没有记者证的记者一律不接待。

The Buyun case is not unique. Due to the lower level of institutionalization in China, and the reforms' resulting lack of substantial legal protection, and because the central authority has unlimited power to intervene in local policies, reforms can be suspended at any moment. This fact explains why most policy entrepreneurs are cautious as far as the publicity of the innovation process is concerned (Zheng, 2007).

Using hierarchical dominance

Policy change is not equivalent to the removal of all old habits, ways of thinking, or formal and informal norms. A change agent can skillfully use old rules and practices to develop and implement his or her new ideas.²⁰ In addition, as embedded actors, policy entrepreneurs tend to spontaneously reproduce the practices and values provided by the existing institutional environment.

The enforcement of a new policy always demands the cooperation of executive agents. Policy entrepreneurs can use persuasive, deliberative or coercive tactics to obtain their cooperation. As discussed above, state policy entrepreneurs in China seldom consider using persuasive or deliberative mechanisms to obtain the support of the actors in charge of the enforcement of a new policy, and the process of new policy implementation is usually undertaken in a coercive way. Decisions are made by the policy entrepreneurs and their team, and cadres in lower-level hierarchies are rarely consulted, nor do they have much discretion in regard to matters of policy enforcement. They are only expected to implement the innovative project in conformity with the procedures set up by the policy entrepreneur. This is particularly true with regard to the selection of experimental units, which are usually decided by policy entrepreneurs. The leaders of these units do not really have a choice and must enforce the pilot project without any leeway. Furthermore, if their performance in enforcing the innovation is assessed annually and if these cadres do not meet the criteria set by the policy entrepreneur, they can be sanctioned by way of a reduction in their bonus or, even worse, they can be outcompeted by counterparts, which can significantly affect their political promotion²¹:

He gave me tight shoes to wear, last year's budget "honest talk" deducted me 2 points. How to hold the "honest talk" should be according to his will, points will be deducted if it does not meet his criteria.

他给我穿小鞋，去年预算恳谈考核扣了我2分，恳谈怎么召开要按照他的意思来，不符合他的标准就被扣分。

Thus, power dominance not only plays a crucial role in the stage of legitimizing innovative ideas. Relying on their formal authority, policy entrepreneurs also use force to compel subordinate cadres to implement the new policy. The use of force and dominance might be an effective strategy for the integration and institutionalization of new policy ideas (Lawrence et al., 2005). However, these coercive strategies might totally go against and undermine democratic values and principles in a blatantly contradictory manner when the objective of the policy innovations is to develop political participation.

Taking experts as advisors

To achieve successful policy change, policy entrepreneurs need the support of the Party secretary and of the main local executive leaders. However, close cooperation between Chinese policy entrepreneurs and experts has also been observed (Zhu and Zhang, 2016). As we see in the three cases, Chinese policy entrepreneurs often surround themselves with experts or scholars. Such is the case of Huang Guohua for Yao Minshuang and Li Fan for Zhang Jinming and Chen Yimin. Experts and scholars are actively involved in the policy and institutional change process in China. Some of them are members of semi-official think tanks, such as the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) and the Party school, while others are based in more autonomous university institutions and NGOs. They facilitate the development of policy innovations in China by “providing expertise, legitimacy, information, and connections to local and central government” (Almen, 2016, p.484). These experts and scholars have multiple functions. First, they are advisors who provide specific expertise from the design of the innovative project to its implementation and institutionalization. Their strong expertise can contribute to the quality of the new policy and its proper enforcement. Experts and scholars are also a source of legitimacy. When policy innovations are initiated in close consultation with experts and academics, they obtain scientific legitimacy. Meanwhile, these advisors also help policy entrepreneurs legitimize their new policies in the eyes of higher authorities through reports and publications, which are sent to the latter through the specific channel of “internal reference” (*neican*). The fact that Huang Guohua's report on Pengzhou's innovative experience has purportedly contributed to the drafting of Document Number Three of the Party is a case in point. Third, experts and scholars function as intermediaries between central and local levels. They assist policy entrepreneurs in interpreting central policies and transmitting information from the central authorities, such as their attitudes regarding the innovation. As a result, policy entrepreneurs can

adjust the rhythm and the content of the reform. Meanwhile, as scholars and experts have conducted detailed field investigations and have direct participatory experience, the reports and publications they send to higher authorities help the latter obtain a better grasp of local innovations. Experts and scholars have at least two channels to gain access to the central authorities. In the first case, they have direct connections with the central government owing to their family background or their formal social position (formal think tank for the central government); such is the case of Li Fan. In the second case, they gain access to the central authorities with the help of other experts or scholars; such is the case of Huang Guohua.

4. Conclusion

Relying on the SIA framework, our empirical analysis of three cases has set change agents back in their specific structural and institutional context. We have redefined the concept of policy entrepreneurs by advancing a new type: the mandated policy entrepreneurs. We have completed the existing findings by specifying with great details the particularity of Chinese policy entrepreneurship. We have found that the general explanatory capacity of the four central elements of policy entrepreneurship described by Mintrom and Norman is confirmed but that they fail to adequately account for the specificity and particularity of the Chinese case. Except for “displaying social acuity”, the other three elements needed to be nuanced. First, in the phase of “defining problems”, policy entrepreneurs do not use the strategy of public persuasion and debates to legitimize their innovative ideas. To obtain legitimacy, they mainly choose to justify their ideas to the Party secretary, not to other actors such as the interested public and the cadres in charge of the implementation of the new policy. Second, Chinese policy entrepreneurs are team players; they actively engage in team-building activities, but the team they look for has high formal and scientific authority: in addition to the main local leaders, they invite experts and scholars whom they trust to join the process, and they rely heavily on their expertise to guarantee the quality and good performance of the new policy. Third, in the implementation phase, Chinese policy entrepreneurs often use pilot projects to test the workability of the new policy project, which is the “leading by example” element identified by Mintrom and Norman. However, in China, even when a pilot project proves to be effective and beneficial, it can be suspended by the higher authority if the latter thinks that it can generate political problems, which is what happened to the Buyun direct election experimentation. Hence, for Chinese policy entrepreneurs, leading by example does not constitute an important persuasive strategy to prove to others that a new policy is feasible. Its principal function might be to test the risk and the workability of a new policy *per se* and to serve as feedback to adjust the policy in question.

The most salient characteristic of Chinese policy entrepreneurship is probably the specific role

played by political power, which is the decisive factor in the process of policy and institutional change. Authorities exert their dominance and coercion through hierarchical political authority. Higher-ranking cadres have unlimited power over those below them. Therefore, the innovative ideas of policy entrepreneurs need to be approved and supported by the Party secretary and officials at higher levels to obtain legitimacy, and in the implementation stage, policy entrepreneurs take advantage of their formal authority to impose their ideas on subordinate cadres in a coercive way. In this sense, we conclude that hierarchical policy entrepreneurship in China is displayed through two kinds of relationships: the *proposal-approval* between policy entrepreneurs and their superiors and the *instruction-execution* between policy entrepreneurs and their subordinates. In the stage of policy formation, policy entrepreneurs propose innovative ideas and projects, but their legitimacy is conferred by the Party and higher government officials; in the stage of policy implementation, policy entrepreneurs give orders and assign tasks, while subordinate cadres must obediently carry out the new policies.

This study brings new light to policy entrepreneurship in the Chinese context but has significant theoretical implications. It would be stimulating to investigate if the third type of policy entrepreneurs our analysis has unearthed is context-specific or if it can be identified in other political systems. Secondly, this article, analyze the specificity of the activities deployed by state actors in China and investigate how structural and institutional contexts shape their behaviors. Whether non-state actors resort to similar strategies to bring about successful policy changes in similar structural and institutional contexts, that is, the extent to which the identities of actors might influence their strategies and activities, needs to be further investigated.

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¹ This article uses the terms “innovation”, “experimentation” and “reform” interchangeably. We define the three terms as a similar process that “creates a disjuncture from standard operating procedures and the routine response of current systems” (Roberts and King, 1991, p. 150). The newness of the policy is determined by its context, where a

policy is “new” to its local situation, although the idea may have been developed earlier elsewhere (Cels and Nauta, 2012).

² As this case took place before we initiated our research, contrary to the two other cases, its description is not based on direct observations but on an in-depth interview with Li Fan and the review of the extensive literature (Li, 2003; Lai, 2004 ; Xu and Ma, 2015 ; Schubert, 2003, Fewsmith, 2013; Shen et al 2017; Wu 2015)

³ It is a three-round selection where any resident could be candidate if he meets the criteria. He then needs to pass a cultural test. Only six candidates remain after the first-round selection and the second round corresponds to an open speech in front of representatives from the government, villages, schools and so on who elect two candidates, then the local people congress elects the mayor.

⁴ Interview with Li Fan, Wenling, 13 February 2013.

⁵ Interview with Li Fan, Hangzhou, 19 November 2016.

⁶ Interview with Chen Yimin, Wenling, 12 octobre 2012.

⁷ He Baogang is an academic then based in Australia (Deakin University). He also contacted James Fishkin (Stanford) for the experimentation of deliberative polling in Zeguo.

⁸ Interview with Huang Guohua, Chengdu, 11 May 2016.

⁹ The United Front work department is a CCP agency in charge of managing relations with the non-Communist Party elite both inside and outside China. Its role is currently being redefined but there are still branches at all administrative levels to guarantee CCP oversight over groups that are not directly associated with the Party and government.

¹⁰ Interview with Yao Minshuang, Pengzhou, 16 May 2016 ; Interview with Huang Guohua, Chengdu, 17 May 2016.

¹¹ Interview with Yao Minshuang, Pengzhou, 16 May 2016

¹² Interview with Huang Guohua, Chengdu, 17 May 2016.

¹³ Interview with Wang Hongshu, Chengdu, 16 May 2016.

¹⁴ Interview with a former leading cadre of the propaganda department of Wenling, Wenling, 15 October 2012.

¹⁵ Interview with Yao Minshuang, Pengzhou, 16 May 2016.

¹⁶ Interview with a former leading cadre of the propaganda department of Wenling, Wenling, 15 October 2012.

¹⁷ Interviews with Li Fan, Wenling, 13 January 2015.

¹⁸ Interview with Li Fan, Hangzhou, 21 November 2016.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ This instrumentalization is quite commonplace in the case of participatory devices. Fischer, 2012, p. 18.

²¹ Interview with a former vice-mayor of Zeguo county, Zeguo, 14 January 2013.

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