

*Packaging New Knowledge to Fit the Chinese Context: Local Cadres' Innovation Partnerships with Hong Kong Social Workers**

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Abstract

Local cadres in China form innovation partnerships with social workers from Hong Kong (HK) to learn new knowledge regarding public service delivery. How do cadres perceive and process information from HK social workers? How do cadres influence meaning construction towards a preferred redefinition? How do cadres reproduce new knowledge to guide real practice? This study answers these questions by scrutinizing the interactions between local cadres and HK social workers in their sense-making of three concepts, namely, innovation, indigenization, and professionalism. This study finds that mainland local cadres' views regarding the three concepts considerably differ from the views held by HK social workers. Thus, cadres exert strenuous efforts to reshape social workers' understanding to ensure that the introduction of new knowledge by this group of professionals conforms to the government's prior-set objectives and agenda. The dominance of cadres reduces the uncertainty involved in learning and,

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thus, enhances their receptivity to new knowledge but simultaneously curtails diversity and elasticity in government knowledge absorption, which decreases the prospect of double loop learning. Moreover, the serious power asymmetry between government cadres and social workers (both overseas and local) is reinforced in the knowledge absorption and reproduction processes.

The literature concerning subnational policy experimentation and governance innovation in China is abundant. Researchers have provided evidence regarding the various causal mechanisms underlying local cadres' motivations and abilities to pursue innovation in governance despite the uncertain nature of innovation, including institutional arrangements, such as decentralization, especially in taxation;¹ competitive promotion and the veto system of local cadres;² local interests;³ and other multifaceted factors that trigger innovations.⁴ While the discussion regarding innovation actors and processes is vast,⁵ the source of innovation, that is, knowledge absorption and reproduction by the Chinese government, remain a less explored theme. March and Simon suggest that most innovations at the organizational level result from borrowing rather than invention.⁶ This observation is supported by extensive research concerning the sources of innovation in industry,⁷ nonprofit organizations and the public sector.⁸ Therefore, without an adequate understanding of the Chinese local government's knowledge absorption and reproduction, which is the process used to recognize, assimilate, and apply new external information,⁹ we cannot gauge its innovative capability.

Knowledge absorption and reproduction occur in an individual's or organization's direct interface with the external environment. In this study, I adopt a microlevel perspective to examine the dynamics of this interface while focusing on how local cadres in mainland China absorb new knowledge from professional social workers from Hong Kong (HK social workers) and reproduce such knowledge to fit the local context. How do cadres perceive and process information from HK social workers? How do cadres influence meaning construction towards a preferred redefinition? How do cadres reproduce new knowledge to guide real practice? These questions are examined through the interactions between local cadres and HK social workers in their sense-making of the following three concepts: innovation, indigenization and professionalism.