

2016 IIAS-IASIA Joint Congress
Chengdu, P.R. China, 20-23 September 2016
WG IX: International Dimensions of the Public Administration
Thursday, 22 September 2016, 14.00-16.00

Revisiting the Learning Theory

The Implementation of Action Learning Into the Chinese Training System¹

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research is to investigate if there has been an interest in implementing Western practices into the Chinese administrative system for their practical use. This paper explains why a learning technology has been adopted into the People's Republic of China's training programs on the central level of governance, and based on the findings it provides suggestions to the practitioners as how to gain success in transferring Western practices. It examines whether it was learning which motivated the implementation of action learning (AL) into the Chinese training system by exploring the first phase of the Sino-Swiss Management Training Program (1994-1996) as well as the publications of Chen Weilan on the topic of action learning. This article concludes that it was learning which motivated the implementation of AL since in China there has been an interest in this method for its values, and its practical use in training as well as decision-making in administration. Data confirm that the Chinese training system was in need for AL for professional use. Consequently, a detailed research has been conducted in China before the practice was implemented and information concerning the effective functioning of this participatory learning method has been collected. This paper suggests that if a Western practice can serve the main reform objectives, can smoothly function within the existing political structures in China, and its effectiveness is convincingly represented, it is highly plausible that it would be considered for its values per se, and therefore the practice could have impact on Chinese training and administrative governance.

KEYWORDS: action learning, diffusion of Western practices, Chinese training system, learning theory

¹ This paper has been advised by Dr. Jing Li from Fudan University. I am grateful to my interviewees, Prof. Lichia Yiu and Prof. Raymond Saner from the Centre for Socio-Economic Development in Switzerland who took their time to engage in this research.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper aims at exploring why there has been an interest in implementing Western practices into the administrative system in China. It proposes the question whether it was learning which motivated the implementation of action learning (AL) into the Chinese training system. For better understanding if learning was the driving force behind the importation of a foreign idea to China, a case study of the first phase of the Sino-Swiss Management Training Program (SSMTP) running between 1994 and 1996 as well as the publications of Chen Weilan will be examined. This article traces the process leading to the implementation of AL and selected the SSMTP for examination as it was the most decisive program ‘facilitating’ the importation of the practice into the Chinese training system. There have been some government bodies which started implementing AL while the SSMTP has been running and many have also proceeded with the implementation right after the program was concluded.² Consequently, motivations for implementation should be searched for in this bilateral project co-operation. It is acknowledged in China that the support of the Swiss government was indispensable for the later incorporation of AL.³ Besides, Chen Weilan is mentioned as the one who was responsible for the implementation of action learning to the Chinese training system.⁴ Even though she must not have been the only one who decided over the incorporation of AL in China, her articles on action learning could serve as good reference points for discerning reasons for the importation of the practice and examining the relevance of the learning theory in this case.

2. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TOPIC

This research aims at filling a gap since existing academic literature dealing with Western impacts on Chinese governance does not fully study the motivations behind implementing ideas. As Bender *et al.* suggest a large majority of studies are concerned with transfers between developed countries while exploring the reasons for the diffusion of ideas, practices and policies from developed to developing countries have not yet gained widespread academic interest.⁵ Literature on Chinese administration is mostly descriptive whereby it traces those ideas which have been picked up from certain Western countries’ administrative bodies but it does not engage in further analysis by outlining what mechanisms were responsible for their disseminations.⁶ There has so far been only one comprehensive research paper which addressed

² Yiu, Lichia and Saner, Raymond. The Sino-Swiss M.A.S.T.E.R.TM Project for Management Training and Organisational Development in the Public Sector of China. A Sino-Swiss Technical Co-operation Project (1994-1996), 2009.

³ Chen Weilan’s Curriculum Vitae (陈伟兰的简历). Accessed at http://baike.baidu.com/link?url=wp_11Nalc64EwZ6a2w6ZbPudaqWPeXnms8WX-robMzgwJircDC9U3Km2IdiZ10zeRYG2msHSTBCqf-ESlcpj

Chen, Weilan. 行动学习法在我国公务员培训中的实践 (Action Learning in Civil Servant Training), 2002, Accessed at

http://wenku.baidu.com/link?url=tFXXD2zJc5fl8KCkXCEs7cdRtkhUT9ovdGN0ODQGEyYO4DRwIs-5LQvOsotZhdbSPtITNb1ZLT3Q8KF8XFJWz3CYII9RzDHYHj_gvjOGRy

⁴ Chen Weilan’s Curriculum Vitae.

⁵ Bender, Katja, Keller, Sonja and Willing, Holger. The Role of International Policy Transfer and Diffusion for Policy Change in Social Protection, 2014, Accessed at https://www.h-brs.de/files/izne/policy_diffusion_1.pdf

⁶ See.: Howell, Jude. Getting to the Roots: Governance Pathologies and Future Prospects. In.: Howell, Jude. ed. Governance in China. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2004.

Straussman, Jeffrey D. and Zhang, Mengzhong. Chinese administrative reforms in international perspective. *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, 2001, Vol. 14 Is. 5 pp. 411-422.

Dong, Lisheng, Christensen, Tom and Painter, Martin. Administrative reform in China’s central government – how much ‘learning from the West’? *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 2008, Vol. 74 No. 3 (September), pp. 351-371.

the question as what motivated the Chinese leaders on the central level of governance to consider Western practices for implementation into its administrative realm.

The article written by Christensen *et al.* selected a case study in which they track the motivations behind the importation of the super-department concept into Chinese governance.⁷ They look at the Sixth Round of Administrative Reforms announced by the Chinese government in March 2008 for identifying patterns of diffusion. Their case study intends to explore whether there has been a rational learning process in the importation of the super-department whereby the elite was interested to implement a new system for its values or rather it was a superstitious learning as they wanted to acquire a Western practice not for the sake of its professional qualities but for increasing the political legitimacy of the system by demonstrating to the public that the government was willing to incorporate Western ideas and was open to change. Christensen *et al.* conclude that the Chinese leaders did not want to import the super-department system as they were in need for the professional values of the practice but they wanted it solely for some political purposes and as such they did not really implement the concept.

In contrast, this paper holds the assumption that there must have been a need for Western practices in Chinese governance not just for political purposes but also for their qualities per se. Studies in the field of policy diffusion argue that governments tend to align themselves with policies that can be found in more successful countries.⁸ Action learning has arrived by the time when the Chinese have already been involved in a long-term and enormous reform process whereby they were introducing certain reform elements to both the economic and the administrative structures in order to fine-tune the functioning of the system. Before and at the beginning of the 1990s there have been several initiatives which aimed at reforming the political and governance structure. A key moment was Deng Xiaoping's Open Door Policy in 1978 when the Chinese decided to open up their economies and to invite foreign investment.⁹ This was followed by the idea of reforming governance structures. Consequently, Deng Xiaoping planted the seeds of a civil service reform in 1980 by proposing four general principles of cadre team building as revolutionary, young, knowledgeable, and professional.¹⁰

Reformers believed that the Party's micromanagement over the bureaucracy had harmed the latter's administrative capacity and thus the Party's political legitimacy, so they wanted to establish a relatively autonomous bureaucracy.¹¹ At the 13th Congress of the Communist Party of China in October 1987, Zhao Ziyang put forward a proposal which intended to offer a new vision on Party-government relations, decentralization, administrative reorganization, recruitment of officials through competitive selection, evaluation of officials, the cadre and

Ngok, Kinglun and Zhu, Guobin. Marketization, globalization and administrative reform in China: a zigzag road to a promising future. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 2007, Vol 73 (2), pp. 217-233.

⁷ Christensen, Tom, Dong, Lisheng and Painter, Martin. A Case Study of China's Administrative Reform: The Importation of the Super-Department. *The American Review of Public Administration*, 2010, Vol. 40. pp. 170-188.

⁸ See: Heinze, Torben. Mechanism-Based Thinking on Policy Diffusion: A Review of Current Approaches in Political Science. KFG Working Paper No. 34. December, 2011.

⁹ Tao-chiu, Lam and Chan, Hon S. Reforming China's Cadre Management System: Two Views of a Civil Service. *Asian Survey*, 1996, Vol. 36. No. 8. (Aug.), pp. 772-786.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 775.

¹¹ Jing, Yijia and Zhu, Qianwei. Civil Service Reform in China: An Unfinished Task of Value Balancing. *Review of Public Personnel Administration*, 2012, 32 (2) pp. 134-148.

personnel system, more social consultation and democracy.¹² Although the majority of the Chinese political elite did not support these ideas, Deng Xiaoping welcomed the initiative.¹³ The personal philosophy, Deng Xiaoping had those days well-explains why he was keen on changing the existing administrative structures. He believed that 'it does not matter whether a cat is white or black, as long as it catches mice'.¹⁴ In this context a more technocratic vision emerged whereby more emphasis has been taken on efficiency and the development of human capacities rather than enhancing ideological kinships.¹⁵

A new Ministry of Personnel was set up in 1988 to implement the state civil service system¹⁶. This has occurred by transforming the personnel function of the Ministry of Labour and Personnel into the new institution.¹⁷ Since then, regional and city governments, as well as a few ministries began experimenting with Western civil service techniques, in particular the use of examinations for selection.¹⁸ With United Nations' assistance (i.e. United Nations Development Programs), the Chinese intensified interactions with Western practitioners and were bringing foreign personnel experts to China and sending Chinese administrators abroad to study Western personnel technology.¹⁹

The following year, the Tiananmen incident occurred which threw Zhao Ziyang out of power, put the development of any change in the state civil service on halt for three years, and encouraged the Party to put stronger control on state and society.²⁰ The Ministry of Personnel was the only institution which was still eager to see changes in the governance system.²¹ In 1992, the reform process got a new incentive. Deng Xiaoping made a trip to Shenzhen where he was pleading for more reforms in both the economic as well as the administrative field.²² He attacked post-Tiananmen opponents of the reform and emphasized the need for new ideas.²³ By the end of the same year, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) also reaffirmed its commitment to reforms and introduced the civil service reform.²⁴ Consequently, in 1993, the Chinese decided to improve government performance and introduced the Provisional Regulations on State Civil Servants. This intended to promote open and competitive recruitment examinations and a more systematic legal framework for personnel management.²⁵

¹² Wang, Hongying. Zhao Ziyang's visions: victims of political turmoil or seeds of a democratic future? p. 19. In.: Wu, Guoguang and Lansdowne, Helen. eds. Zhao Ziyang and China's Political Future. Routledge. China Policy Series, 2012.

¹³ Tao-chiu and Chan. Reforming China's Cadre Management System: Two Views of a Civil Service, p. 772-786.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 775.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 776.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 778.

¹⁷ Aufrecht, Steven E. and Siu Bun, Li. Reform with Chinese Characteristics: The Context of Chinese Civil Service Reform. Public Administration Review, 1995, Vol. 55, No. 2. (March-April), pp. 175-182.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 175.

¹⁹ Ibid., p.175.

²⁰ Wang, Xiaoqi. China's Civil Service Reform. Routledge, 2012, p. 4.

²¹ Aufrecht and Bun. Reform with Chinese Characteristics: The Context of Chinese Civil Service Reform. p. 175.

²² Zhao, Suisheng. Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour. Elite Politics in Post-Tiananmen China. Asian Survey, 1993, Vol. 33, No. 8 (Aug.), pp. 739-756.

²³ Ibid., p. 741.

²⁴ Wang. China's Civil Service Reform, p. 4.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 3.

The new regulation aimed at optimizing the work of civil servants, curbing corruption and improving administrative performance.²⁶ This new legal tool also pointed out that the establishment of a civil service system was an important step ahead to promote the abilities and skills of the civil servants through which government efficiency could be improved.²⁷ The Chinese political elite believed that changes in economic governance would need a more responsive administrative system to achieve growth.²⁸ This conviction led them to carry out several institutional changes. The unique way action learning was introduced in China further suggests that there must have been a need for the qualities of the practice per se. It was implemented after the Chinese trainers and government officials were participating in the first phase of the Sino-Swiss Management Training Program (1994-1996) which offered the opportunity to them not just to get a general overview of AL but also to practice its functioning by being involved in several seminar sessions for over a long period of time. At the time of its implementation in China, AL has been widely used in several Western countries as those were committed to invest in public management and leadership development.²⁹ It was not a concept like the super-department which, as Christensen *et al.* argue,³⁰ has already been outdated by the time it arrived at China for consideration.

Consequently, further studying the motivations behind the diffusion of Western practices and, in particular, revisiting the learning question is necessary for better understanding on what grounds a practice is selected for implementation in China. This can help practitioners from the West to design their strategies, i.e. to understand the approach they take and the most probable impact it can have. On the one hand, this article aims at developing a new perspective by exploring whether it is possible to identify motivations other than political for incorporating Western practices into Chinese governance while on the other hand it would also offer a methodologically more solid analysis. The fact that over twenty years have passed since AL was implemented in China makes this case study strong enough to examine why there has been an interest in taking foreign idea to Chinese administrative governance. Christensen *et al.* acknowledge that assessing their case study was a difficult task.³¹ They were engaged in research too early since at the time of writing their article the future of the super-department concept in China was still not predictable. Their article was completed in the same year when the super-department concept was introduced at the Sixth Round of Administrative Reforms.

3. DEFINING ACTION LEARNING

Traditional action learning has been originated from the West, and was introduced by Reginald Revans who began to articulate and implement his approach in the 1930s in the United Kingdom.³² His philosophy is centred on the conviction that there can be no learning without action and no action without learning.³³ According to him, a learning process should include two elements: traditional instruction or programmed learning (P) and critical reflection or

²⁶ Ibid., p. 3.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 3.

²⁸ Tao-chiu and Chan. Reforming China's Cadre Management System: Two Views of a Civil Service, p. 773.

²⁹ Rigg, Clare. Developing public service leadership – the context for action learning. In.: Rigg, Clare and Richards, Sue. eds. Action Learning, Leadership and Organizational Development in Public Services. Routledge. Taylor and Francis Group, 2006.

³⁰ See: Christensen, Dong and Painter. A Case Study of China's Administrative Reform: The Importation of the Super-Department, p. 176.

³¹ Ibid., p. 184.

³² Boshyk, Yury. Business Driven Action Learning: The Key Elements. In.: Boshyk, Yury. ed. Business Driven Action Learning: Global Best Practices. Palgrave Macmillan, 2000, p. XIII.

³³ Ibid., p. XIII.

questioning insight (Q).³⁴ This offers the following learning equation: $L = P + Q$ which is presented all across the academic literature discussing action learning.³⁵ The central component of AL is a search for fresh questions and insights, including both self-questioning as well as a reflection on others' thoughts.³⁶ Revans emphasized that questioning insight is the starting point and that people learn very effectively from and with each other, as distinguished from highly formal didactic approaches to learning.³⁷

Revans never intended for all applications of action learning to carbon copy of his beliefs but aimed at providing room for experimentation and alteration of the practice with a hope that certain basic ingredients would always be present in any context wherever the method is used.³⁸ These include true empowerment of learners; minimum interference in the process by external expert facilitators; use of real problems that are of genuine difficulty and urgency; getting people out of their comfort zones by having them operate in unfamiliar settings and deal with unfamiliar problems; and reflecting throughout on these experiences and the assumptions behind their actions, including their implementation of solutions to the real problem addressed.³⁹ In practice, an action learning setting is expected to design an opportunity for continuous learning, promoting inquiry and dialogue, questioning insight, challenging of assumptions, and encouraging the reframing of action learning problems.⁴⁰ The major benefits of AL include the addressing of challenges governments and agencies face, building of interpersonal competence, developing leadership competence and the establishment of innovative mental models which could be effectively used for problem-solving.⁴¹

4. METHODOLOGY

This study has a qualitative research design and is based on a case study analysis. Sugiyama asserts that a qualitative analysis of the diffusion of ideas, practices and policies can clarify the motivations that drive the replication of ideas and policies developed elsewhere.⁴² Foster as well as Mintrom and Vergari further argue that case studies are ideal for exploring the motivations behind ideas as they can provide the insight which can be used to better inform our understanding of the diffusion of innovations.⁴³ China has been selected for this research since academic literature rarely highlights in a comprehensive manner what motivates decision-makers on the central government level in this country to transfer ideas from Western countries.

³⁴ Mumford, Alan. Learning in Action Learning. In.: Center for Socio-Economic Development. Best Management Development Practices. A Benchmarking Conference. Geneva, 1996.

³⁵ Boshyk. Business Driven Action Learning, p. 3.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 5.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 5.

³⁸ Dilworth, Robert L. Explaining Traditional Action Learning: Concepts and Beliefs. In.: Boshyk, Yury and Dilworth, Robert L. eds. Action Learning: History and Evolution. Palgrave. Macmillan, 2010, p. 3.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 3.

⁴⁰ O'Neil, Judy, Watkins, Karen E. and Marsick, Victoria J. Action Learning and the Learning Organization: Building Learning Capacity in Individuals, Groups and Organizations. In.: Dilworth, Robert L. and Boshyk, Yury. Action Learning and its Applications. Palgrave. Macmillan, 2010.

⁴¹ Wallis, Joe and McLoughlin, Linda. Public Value-Seeking Leadership: Its Nature, Rationale and Development in the Context of Public Management Reform, p. 102. In.: Goldfinch, Shaun and Wallis, Joe. eds. International Handbook of Public Management Reform. Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2009.

⁴² Sugiyama, Natasha Borges. Ideology and Networks: The Politics of Social Policy Diffusion in Brazil. Latin American Research Review, 2008, Vol. 43, No. 3, pp. 82-108.

⁴³ Foster, Kenneth W. Chinese Public Policy Innovation and the Diffusion of Innovations: An Initial Exploration. Chinese Public Administration Review, 2005, 3(1). pp. 1-13.

Mintrom, Michael and Vergari, Sandra. Policy Networks and Innovation Diffusion: The Case of State Education Reforms. The Journal of Politics, 1998, Vol. 60, No. 1 (February), p. 127.

It is essential to consider China in the field dealing with the global diffusion of ideas, policies and practices as since its opening up to the world at the end of the 1970s, the Chinese contacts to the outside world have been increasing and the country attracted several foreign projects aiming at changing Chinese governance to a certain extent.⁴⁴

I chose to look at the diffusion of action learning as a case study as this method has been implemented in China (which is an obvious prerequisite to analyse any reasons of diffusion) but it has not yet been examined what mechanisms assisted its dissemination to Chinese governance. It is a unique case study which could offer new insights as how Western practices diffuse into Chinese governance. Studies concerning action learning in Chinese governance do not analyze as what motivated the Chinese government to adopt the practice. Most of them are descriptive in nature focusing on providing either a basic or a detailed introduction to the practice while some offer a general overview of project co-operations in which action learning was used as a tool to convey knowledge and to facilitate interactive learning.⁴⁵ In China, both central and a few local government bodies implemented the action learning method since the program was offered to a wide range of participants.⁴⁶ This paper will, however, only examine the motivations behind the implementation of action learning on the central level of governance. Motivations for adopting this practice might vary in each province due to the different dynamics of the local contexts. Deeply examining such diversities would require separate case studies. Analysing in this research as why ideas and policies diffuse to central government bodies and

⁴⁴ Bohnet, Armin, Hong, Zhong and Müller, Frank. China's open-door policy and its significance for transformation of the economic system. *Intereconomics*, 1993, (July), Volume 28, Issue 4, pp. 191-197.

⁴⁵ Yang, Bin and Huang, Chuang. 行动学习法是公务员培训模式创新的有益尝试 (Action Learning is a beneficial method in innovating of the civil servants training system). *Ascent* (Bimonthly), 2009, Vol. 28, No. 1, pp. 95-98.

Chen, Weilan. 行动学习法在我国公务员培训中的实践 (Action Learning in Civil Servant Training), p. 30.

Chen, Weilan. Action Learning Practice in Chinese Management Training: A Case Study of Training and Development for Senior and Middle Civil Servants in Western Provinces. In.: Rosenbaum, Allan and Gajdosová, Ludmila. *State Modernization and Decentralization - Implications for Education and Training in Public Administration: Selected Central European and Global Perspectives*. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2003, Accessed at <http://www.nispa.org/files/publications/ebooks/nispacee-statemodernization2003.pdf>

Chen, Weilan, Gu, Yun and Chen, Fei. 行动学习法及其在我国的应用研究 (Action Learning Method and Its Application in China). *福建行政学院学报* (Journal of Fujian Administration Institute), 2009, Accessed at http://en.cnki.com.cn/Article_en/CJFDTOTAL-FZJZ200903002.htm

Boisot, Max H. Action Learning with Chinese Characteristics: The China-EEC Management Programme. *Management Education and Development*, 1986, Vol. 17, Pt. 2, p. 128.

Yiu, Lichia and Saner, Raymond. Building Internal Capacities for Change in China: Action Learning in the Public and Private Sectors. In.: Boshyk, Yury, ed. *Action Learning Worldwide: Experiences of Leadership and Organizational Development*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.

Yiu and Saner. The Sino-Swiss M.A.S.T.E.R.TM Project for Management Training and Organisational Development in the Public Sector of China. A Sino-Swiss Technical Co-operation Project (1994-1996).

Yiu, Lichia and Saner, Raymond. Use of Action Learning as a Vehicle for Capacity Building in China. *Performance Improvement Quarterly*, 1998, Vol. 11 (1), January, A Special Issue on Action Learning. Accessed at <http://www.csend.org/images/articles/files/2008121-AL-CHINA.pdf>

Yiu, Lichia and Saner, Raymond. Lessons Learnt From Implementing A Large System Development Project in China, 1999, Accessed at

http://www.csend.org/images/articles/files/20110528_icap98_v3.pdf

⁴⁶ Yiu and Saner. The Sino-Swiss M.A.S.T.E.R.TM Project for Management Training and Organisational Development in the Public Sector of China. A Sino-Swiss Technical Co-operation Project 1994-1996.

central training programs can help develop a more sophisticated understanding of the political incentives behind decision-makings as regards to accepting foreign ideas on the upper levels.⁴⁷

The rapid speed of globalization and technological development enhances a smoother information-flow, develops a highly interconnected society and accelerates the dissemination of ideas.⁴⁸ As it is today more comfortable to access information, governments take a challenge and investigate practices which are applied outside of their borders.⁴⁹ Consequently, theoretical literature asserts that diffusion of ideas, practices and policies occur.⁵⁰ In that literature there is a general consensus as what factors can motivate the dissemination of practices.⁵¹ They offer four distinct theoretical frameworks to explain why ideas diffuse, including *social construction, coercion, competition, and learning*.⁵² This paper reviews one of these mechanisms, i.e. learning, in order to understand if it played any role in the diffusion of AL to China.

This article relies on one of the conceptualizations of learning as being a voluntary act whereby governments confronted with the uncertainty of difficult policy decisions may find it relatively simple and inexpensive to gain new information simply by observing the results of particular policies and practices in other countries.⁵³ They then adopt those policies or practices which they perceive as being good only because politicians are persuaded that they are the best.⁵⁴ The reason they do so is that they are in serious need for new inspirations as their local solutions cannot assist them to overcome the shortcomings.⁵⁵ The learning theory can be understood in the framework of the rational choice theory which emphasizes that even if there is a large information-flow in the world, policy-makers have the ability to make informed decisions.⁵⁶ Learning stresses on the importance of rational decision whereby governments rationally utilize experiences of external actors in order to solve domestic problems.⁵⁷ The rationality of the decision lies in the fact that the recipient well-scrutinizes the objectives of innovative ideas and their ability to fit into the new circumstances.⁵⁸ When decision-makers are confronted

⁴⁷ Shipan, Charles R. and Volden, Craig. The Mechanisms of Policy Diffusion. *American Journal of Political Science*, 2008, Vol. 52, No. 4 (October), pp. 840-857.

⁴⁸ Dolowitz, David and Marsh, David. Who Learns What From Whom: A Review of the Policy Transfer Literature. *Political Studies*, 1996, XLIV, pp. 343-357.

⁴⁹ Zhang, Zhen-ting and Li, Dong. 行动学习法是值得提倡的学习方法 (Learning by Action Is a Learning Method Worth Promoting). *教育与现代化* (Education and Modernization), 2005, No. 1. (March), pp. 34-37, p. 55.

⁵⁰ Dobbin, Frank, Simmons, Beth and Garrett, Geoffrey. The Global Diffusion of Public Policies: Social Construction, Coercion, Competition or Learning? *Annual Review of Sociology*, 2007, Accessed at http://scholar.harvard.edu/files/dobbin/files/2007_ars_dobbin_simmons.pdf?m=1360040223

⁵¹ Gilardi, Fabrizio. Transnational diffusion: Norms, ideas, and policies, 2012, Accessed at http://www.fabriziogilardi.org/resources/papers/gilardi_handbook_IR_v2.pdf

⁵² See: Dobbin, Simmons and Garrett. The Global Diffusion of Public Policies: Social Construction, Coercion, Competition or Learning?, p. 457.

⁵³ Meseguer, Covadonga. Policy Learning, Policy Diffusion, and the Making of a New Order. *The Annals of the American Academy, AAPSS*, 598, 2005, March, p. 72.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁵⁵ Dobbin, Simmons and Garrett. The Global Diffusion of Public Policies: Social Construction, Coercion, Competition or Learning?, p. 461.

⁵⁶ See: Quackenbush, Stephen L. The Rationality of Rational Choice Theory. *International Interactions*, 2004, 30, pp. 87–107.

⁵⁷ Dobbin, Simmons and Garrett. The Global Diffusion of Public Policies: Social Construction, Coercion, Competition or Learning?, p. 460.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 461.

with a problem, they simplify the task of finding a solution by choosing an alternative that has proven successful elsewhere.⁵⁹

Action learning was introduced to the training officials of the Organisation Department of the CCP during several UNDP financed training seminars in China running for the period of 1986-1993 and became the leading training methodology during the first phase of the SSMTTP.⁶⁰ It is clear that the SSMTTP was a driving force to consider action learning in China since there have already been a few provinces which replicated the method while the program was running and not yet even completed.⁶¹ Besides, it was just a year after the program was finalized, in 1997 to be precise, when the use of action learning boosted to several central government organizations and the Chinese also started launching their own action learning motivated training programs.⁶²

Action learning in China began attracting the attention of the senior training centre of the central government in 1991.⁶³ It was in fact the period when discussions over the potentials of launching the SSMTTP were on their ways. By 1997 the Ministry of Personnel in China has initiated its first Train-the-Trainer program for senior training managers and implemented AL.⁶⁴ In 1998 the training centre of the Organization Department (i.e. CTCSPMO) introduced action learning. In the same year, the CTCSPMO applied action learning to the training and development of senior and middle level officials from Western provinces in China and partially modified the practice in order to better fit to the local conditions.⁶⁵ In 2006 the National School of Administration (国家行政学院) or as it is today called the Chinese Academy of Governance also implemented the practice in order to better train senior government officials.⁶⁶

It is acknowledged that AL came to China with the support of the Swiss government.⁶⁷ The most important actors being involved in assisting the diffusion of AL into the Chinese central training system on the Swiss side were the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and the directors of the Centre for Socio-Economic Development (CSEND). The SDC is a government agency operating under the supervision of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs of Switzerland and thus it is a body of the Swiss government.⁶⁸ One of the most important missions of the SDC is to assist growth and well-being in developing countries by providing development aid and expertise.⁶⁹ Its activities are approved by the Swiss

⁵⁹ Berry, William D. and Baybeck, Brady. Using Geographic Information Systems to Study Interstate Competition. *American Political Science Review*, 2005, 99 (4), pp. 505-519.

⁶⁰ 2016G02

⁶¹ See: Yiu and Saner. The Sino-Swiss M.A.S.T.E.R.TM Project for Management Training and Organisational Development in the Public Sector of China. A Sino-Swiss Technical Co-operation Project 1994-1996. p. 16.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁶³ Chen. Action Learning Practice in Chinese Management Training: A Case Study of Training and Development for Senior and Middle Civil Servants in Western Provinces, p. 153.

⁶⁴ Yiu and Saner. The Sino-Swiss M.A.S.T.E.R.TM Project for Management Training and Organisational Development in the Public Sector of China. A Sino-Swiss Technical Co-operation Project (1994-1996).

⁶⁵ Chen. Action Learning Practice in Chinese Management Training: A Case Study of Training and Development for Senior and Middle Civil Servants in Western Provinces, p. 153.

Chen, Weilan, Gu, Yun and Chen, Fei. 行动学习法及其在我国的应用研究 (Action Learning Method and Its Application in China).

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁶⁷ Chen Weilan's Curriculum Vitae.

Chen, Weilan. 行动学习法在我国公务员培训中的实践 (Action Learning in Civil Servant Training).

⁶⁸ See: Swiss Agency for Development and Co-operation. Portrait: SDC in Brief, 2014, Accessed at <https://www.eda.admin.ch/deza/en/home/sdc/portrait.html>

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

Parliament.⁷⁰ CSEND is an independent, project-financed, non-profit research and development organization established in 1993 and situated in Geneva.⁷¹ It was the partner of the SDC in implementing the first phase of the SSMTP. The directors of the Centre, Raymond Saner and Lichia Yiu, were interacting with the Chinese throughout the Sino-Swiss project.

It has previously been asserted that on the Chinese side one actor was certainly Chen Weilan who ensured the smooth implementation of the practice. She was an influential person as she hold a powerful office by way of being the director of CTCSPMO, the central training office under the supervision of the State Council, when the SSMTP was running and when AL was finally implemented into the Chinese system. As China possesses a dual-track bureaucratic system and a delicate power structure whereby the Party and the state is closely intertwined creating visible and invisible layers of governance,⁷² it is difficult to discern all the relevant actors from such a sophisticated network system. Furthermore, it is unlikely to closely monitor how the decision-making process looked like in this particular case as such sensitive information would remain hidden from the public.

Since Chen Weilan had the most direct link to the Swiss and is regarded as the founder of AL in China, scrutinizing her thoughts on AL would be sufficient for better understanding the motivations for incorporating such a practice into the Chinese training system. This paper will therefore analyse those articles Chen Weilan published on AL. As a main method of data collection, interviews have also been conducted with Raymond Saner and Lichia Yiu as they were important actors being involved in the Sino-Swiss Management Training Program and had a very good overview of the Chinese partner's expectations.⁷³ For operationalizing learning, it is necessary to examine whether there has been a need for a particular practice for its professional values per se and has there been a thorough research conducted.⁷⁴ Another important indicator is the awareness of the effective functioning of a practice.⁷⁵ It is therefore indispensable to scrutinize if a government had knowledge about the effective functioning of a practice.

For examining whether the Chinese conducted a detailed research of AL, I will look at the intensity of involvement in project co-operations as well as whether AL was modified in order to fit into the Chinese circumstances or it was adopted without much reflection. To understand whether the Chinese were in need for AL, I will examine if they referred to any shortcomings of the administrative system and to the belief that this could have been resolved by applying participatory learning methods. I will also explore how the SSMTP started as well as to what extent the Chinese were involved and contributed to the running of the program. Finally, by examining whether the Chinese knew about the effective functioning of AL, I will look at the execution of the SSMTP; the presence or the lack of opportunities for well-informing the Chinese about the main characteristics of AL. I will seek to understand the perceptions of those officials on AL who participated in the SSMTP by inquiring the kinds of feedbacks they provided to the Swiss upon completion of the first phase of the SSMTP.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 1.

⁷¹ CSEND. Vision, Mission and Objectives, ?, Accessed at <http://csend.org/about-csend>

⁷² Urio, Paolo. Reconciling State, Market and Society in China. Routledge, 2010, p. 171.

⁷³ The appendix provides a list of interview partners along with important details about them as well as an overview of the coding system used throughout this paper.

⁷⁴ Dobbin, Simmons and Garrett. The Global Diffusion of Public Policies: Social Construction, Coercion, Competition or Learning?, p. 462.

⁷⁵ Gilardi, Fabrizio. Four Ways We Can Improve Policy Diffusion Research. State Politics and Policy Quarterly, 2016, 16(1). p. 12, Accessed at <http://www.fabriziogilardi.org/resources/papers/Gilardi-SPPQ-2016.pdf>

5. THE SINO-SWISS MANAGEMENT TRAINING PROGRAM

The SSMTTP was a training of trainers (TOT) program which invited sixty government officials including trainers, their supervisors as well as Party officials in order to enhance their abilities and skills in the training of future civil servants.⁷⁶ They were coming from a wide range of organizations, including provincial administrative cadre training institutes, provincial Party schools along with their supervisory bodies from the training departments of provincial Organization Departments of the Chinese Communist Party as well as the central training centre and other central government organs.⁷⁷ These included but were not limited to Jiangsu Administrative College, Jilin Administrative College, Tianjin Management Training Centre, Lanzhou Management Training Centre as well as the Ministry of Personnel in Beijing and the National School of Administration.⁷⁸ The China Training Centre for Senior Personnel Management Officials (CTCSPMO), which was operating under the surveillance of the Organization Department of the CCP, handpicked government officials and training experts from both central government and certain provinces for participating in the learning sessions of the project.⁷⁹ These officials were expected to learn about theories and methods, and once they return to their work stations to apply the acquired knowledge there.⁸⁰

In this sense, the program covered the two most important ‘layers’ of Chinese governance as it reached both the executives (training schools being responsible for implementing training programs) and the decision-makers (Party schools being entrusted to set up training plans). The participants of the Sino-Swiss project were sponsored by twenty provincial governments along with the Ministry of Personnel, and State Economic and Trade Commission.⁸¹ “Besides providing some financial contribution to cover the costs of the SSMTTP, the Chinese also made quite a significant sacrifice in order to let us run this project since they had to replace many of their most qualified officials for several months while they attended the training sessions” – points out Yiu.⁸² The officials who took part in the TOT program were aged between 28 and 40 years old, had a minimum of 3 years work experience in training personnel and held university degrees, some even postgraduate qualifications.⁸³

The objective of the Sino-Swiss Management Training Program was, on the one hand, to strengthen the in-service training and development function within the administrative system while on the other hand, to improve the efficiency and the effectiveness of China’s training delivery system including administrative cadre training schools, Party schools and economic cadre training schools.⁸⁴ Saner and Yiu believe they achieved this goal in two ways. First, by teaching the individual trainees modern training techniques and second, by helping training

⁷⁶ Yiu and Saner. The Sino-Swiss M.A.S.T.E.R.TM Project for Management Training and Organisational Development in the Public Sector of China. A Sino-Swiss Technical Co-operation Project 1994-1996, p. 6.

⁷⁷ Yiu and Saner. Building Internal Capacities for Change in China: Action Learning in the Public and Private Sectors, p. 295.

⁷⁸ Yiu and Saner. The Sino-Swiss M.A.S.T.E.R.TM Project for Management Training and Organisational Development in the Public Sector of China. A Sino-Swiss Technical Co-operation Project 1994-1996, p. 18.

⁷⁹ 2016G01 and 2016G02

⁸⁰ 2016G01 and 2016G02

⁸¹ Yiu and Saner. Building Internal Capacities for Change in China: Action Learning in the Public and Private Sectors, p. 295.

⁸² 2016G01

⁸³ Yiu and Saner. The Sino-Swiss M.A.S.T.E.R.TM Project for Management Training and Organisational Development in the Public Sector of China. A Sino-Swiss Technical Co-operation Project 1994-1996, p. 2.

⁸⁴ Yiu and Saner. Building Internal Capacities for Change in China: Action Learning in the Public and Private Sectors, p. 295.

institutions which participated in the bilateral project to improve their training management programs and their training management systems.⁸⁵ As it has already been mentioned, the expectation of such a program was that those who were trained during the three years would share and distribute their knowledge once returning to their training centres, and that slowly these practices would be applied in administration and decision-making practices.⁸⁶ While the SSMTTP was running, the Chinese trainers (i.e. the participants) were even expected to offer ‘promotional’ seminars at their home organizations with the purpose of practicing, and sharing their newly-gained ideas and methods.⁸⁷

As the timeline is concerned, the Sino-Swiss Management Training Program was executed in different phases. In the initial preparatory phase, from September 1993 to March 1994, the participants were provided with intensive English language courses.⁸⁸ As the language of instruction throughout that program was English, Yiu explains it was necessary to offer a set of courses in order to make sure that everyone had the same level and the understanding of the concepts used in management.⁸⁹ After the language learning phase was completed, the first cycle of the TOT program was implemented from March 1994 to July 1995 followed by a long review period and finally the second TOT cycle from March 1996 to December 1996.⁹⁰ Feedback and reflection seem to have been provided throughout the whole project in various forms. For instance, during the review period, the project objectives were revisited as well as the development of the participants was closely examined.⁹¹ At the end of the program, a conference has been organized in order to reflect on the achievements as well as the challenges which the organizers, the teaching team as well as the participants experienced.⁹²

Regarding the concrete execution of the program, each cycle was composed of three building blocks.⁹³ The first building block consisted of 10 two-week training seminars in Beijing organized by international as well as a few Chinese experts who were selected by CSEND to assist the training program.⁹⁴ During this period, participants learned about general as well as training management skills and theories such as project management, leadership styles, modes of instruction, management of training institutions and evaluation of training effectiveness.⁹⁵ In block two, participants learned about various civil service systems in order to acquire a comparative outlook, concepts in organizational behaviour as well as practical methods of team building.⁹⁶ The third block focused on deepening the knowledge of Chinese trainers on New Public Management, macroeconomics as well as policy analysis.⁹⁷ It was also during the third block when some of the participants of the program had a chance to visit companies and

⁸⁵ 2016G01 and 2016G02

⁸⁶ 2016G01

⁸⁷ Yiu and Saner. *Building Internal Capacities for Change in China: Action Learning in the Public and Private Sectors*, p. 296.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 295.

⁸⁹ 2016G01

⁹⁰ Yiu and Saner. *Building Internal Capacities for Change in China: Action Learning in the Public and Private Sectors*. p. 299.

⁹¹ 2016G01

⁹² See: Center for Socio-Economic Development. *Best Management Development Practices. A Benchmarking Conference*. Geneva, 1996.

⁹³ 2016G01

⁹⁴ Yiu and Saner. *The Sino-Swiss M.A.S.T.E.R.™ Project for Management Training and Organisational Development in the Public Sector of China. A Sino-Swiss Technical Co-operation Project 1994-1996*. p. 4.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁹⁶ 2016G02

⁹⁷ Yiu and Saner. *The Sino-Swiss M.A.S.T.E.R.™ Project for Management Training and Organisational Development in the Public Sector of China. A Sino-Swiss Technical Co-operation Project 1994-1996*. p. 5.

government institutions in Switzerland and several other Western European countries such as Germany, France or Italy, in order to acquire practical knowledge.⁹⁸ These program blocks were supplemented by on-the-job application whereby participants returned to their home organizations for six weeks and began applying the new skills they acquired.⁹⁹ For instance, they needed to conduct projects in order to identify the training needs of their institutions.¹⁰⁰

For facilitating the effective information process, action learning was used as a method of knowledge transfer.¹⁰¹ In order to build-up an action learning environment, teams were comprised of trainers from the same organizations and were instructed to think over different sorts of questions along with their peers, for instance how to improve decision-making capacities or how to establish effective motivation mechanisms.¹⁰² The Sino-Swiss program was committed to Revans' action learning principles (learning by doing) and operationalized David Kolb's learning cycle in order to create such a learning situation.¹⁰³ In practice this means that action learning was used in a way that participants were given knowledge and skills first, and only after then were being asked to apply them to the Chinese context and issues.¹⁰⁴ In this sense, they moved to the action phase whereby they started putting their ideas into practice.¹⁰⁵

The process started by giving an assignment to a group which required a move forward (active involvement by all the participants), it was followed by a reflection step (reviewing what has been discussed together) and the developing of a response to the assignment. The final step was to put the findings into practice.¹⁰⁶ "The Chinese trainers were very receptive to action learning. In fact, they really enjoyed learning in such an environment whereby they were able to utilize their knowledge and experiences. They felt empowered that they themselves had a chance to find solutions to the problems their institutions experienced" – points out Yiu.¹⁰⁷ Reactions from clients, like the deputy directors of the provincial organization departments of the CCP, the academic dean of the Central Party School or the directors of the training units of the Ministry of Personnel and the State Economic and Trade Commission were also very positive as they found the outcomes of the project as well as the innovative ideas very useful.¹⁰⁸ The fact that the project continued with a second phase whereby the new implementing partner of the SDC was the University of Geneva also proves the high level of satisfaction of the Chinese and the success of the project. This therefore suggests that the Chinese participants enjoyed being involved in the program and appreciated to be exposed to challenges. They were receptive in using action learning as a method to deepen their knowledge and to explore new insights to organizational development. The positive feedbacks clearly demonstrate that the Chinese were aware of the effective functioning of AL.

⁹⁸ 2016G01

⁹⁹ Yiu and Saner. The Sino-Swiss M.A.S.T.E.R.TM Project for Management Training and Organisational Development in the Public Sector of China. A Sino-Swiss Technical Co-operation Project 1994-1996. p. 4.

¹⁰⁰ 2016G02

¹⁰¹ 2016G01

¹⁰² Yiu and Saner. The Sino-Swiss M.A.S.T.E.R.TM Project for Management Training and Organisational Development in the Public Sector of China. A Sino-Swiss Technical Co-operation Project 1994-1996. p. 11.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 7.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 7.

¹⁰⁵ Yiu, Lichia. Globalisation and Its Impact on Leadership Development and Training in the 21st Century. IASIA Annual Conference. Beijing, 2000.

¹⁰⁶ Yiu and Saner. The Sino-Swiss M.A.S.T.E.R.TM Project for Management Training and Organisational Development in the Public Sector of China. A Sino-Swiss Technical Co-operation Project 1994-1996. p. 12.

¹⁰⁷ 2016G01

¹⁰⁸ Yiu and Saner. Building Internal Capacities for Change in China: Action Learning in the Public and Private Sectors. p. 302.

As Yiu and Saner¹⁰⁹ point out, their objective was in fact to satisfy both the Swiss and the Chinese side in order to make sure that the project was running without interruptions for the three years period. As Yiu explains¹¹⁰ CSEND decided to select Chinese examples instead of bringing Western ones in order to facilitate the effective use of action learning and to show respect to the environment in which the learning was taking place. “We have even trained a few practical teaching styles to those Western professors we invited to China and whose mission was to give lectures to the Chinese participants during the program for ensuring that they complied with the Chinese specificities” – added Saner.¹¹¹ He continued that they intended to do their most to avoid any opportunities for raising sensitive issues which could have led to potential conflicts. “We heard stories that back in the past experts from the United Kingdom used an unfortunate word ‘evolution’ for describing the development of an administrative system while they were distributing a lecture to the Chinese. Of course, the Chinese were unpleasantly surprised since in Party politics there was no such a concept as ‘evolution’. In their vocabulary there has only been ‘revolution’ due to the historical circumstances. We certainly did not want to make such a mistake” – asserted Saner.¹¹² The choice for using Chinese cases instead of Western examples was not only useful for facilitating the smooth running of the program but also provided the Chinese with a good understanding as how AL could be applied to the Chinese reality. This further ensured that the Chinese were aware of the effective functioning of AL by the time the first phase of the SSMTTP was completed.

Although the first phase of the SSMTTP was not the first occasion when the Chinese came across the concept of AL this was the most decisive step since only after the completion of this program the Chinese started implementing AL. One of the first occasions when the Chinese had a chance to deepen their knowledge about AL was in the middle of the 1980s thanks to a China-Europe co-operation, the China-EEC Management Program (CEMP).¹¹³ This initiative intended to spread the practice of AL in China, however, at that time the Chinese have not yet been inclined to implement the practice.¹¹⁴ The next opportunity came by the end of the 1980s for exploring AL from several perspectives due to seminars in China and study visits to different European countries. During 1989, nine training workshops were organised by Yiu and Saner who recruited experts from different countries to deliver training seminars in Beijing lasting each between 2 to 15 days followed by another four similar workshops offered to participants from the Organization Department of the CCP being financed by the UNDP.¹¹⁵ While training seminars were organised in Beijing, the Chinese counterparts from CTCSPMO expressed interest to Yiu and Saner to organise study visits to different foreign countries to learn more about institutional arrangements in governance and training management techniques.

They accompanied different delegations from the CCP to countries such as Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, the United States of America, Singapore and Japan.¹¹⁶ The UNDP seminars and these short professional study visits in the 1980s further introduced AL to the Chinese and provided opportunities to them to see in what ways different

¹⁰⁹ 2016G01 and 2016G02

¹¹⁰ 2016G01

¹¹¹ 2016G02

¹¹² 2016G02

¹¹³ Boisot. *Action Learning with Chinese Characteristics: The China-EEC Management Programme. Management Education and Development*, p. 128.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

¹¹⁵ 2016G02

¹¹⁶ 2016G01

countries organise training through AL which later, at the time the SSMTP started running, became the leading methodology for conveying knowledge.¹¹⁷ These study visits were very important for internal assessments and consensus making within the CCP in regard to the need for public administrative reforms.¹¹⁸ It also provided several groups of CCP officials the opportunity to discern differences and commonalities of modern public administrative systems.¹¹⁹ Learning about these differences and similarities offered the Chinese officials with ample opportunities to select among the different Western forms of public administrations those they saw best fit for China, and can fulfil the need for reforming and updating its public administration.¹²⁰

This also provided a chance to Yiu and Saner to get closer contact to Chinese officials and to slowly deepen relations. Since the introduction of those seminars, the meeting of Yiu and Saner with Chinese government officials occurred on a regular basis, and had longer and more formal discussions concerning management and organizational development issues.¹²¹ Even though the intensified contacts indicated that the Chinese were getting more and more interested and would be willing to take actions in order to be able to make co-operation, it was quite unclear where their discussions were leading to up until the very end of the 1980s.¹²² It was when the Chinese expressed to Yiu that they would be eager to co-operate and to run together a project whereby Chinese government officials could learn certain Western management practices.¹²³

A meeting with Mr. Gao Shiqi in 1989 was decisive.¹²⁴ This was the first occasion the Chinese formally expressed that they expected from Yiu to teach government officials.¹²⁵ The talks in Beijing with Gao Shiqi centred on the need to support China's open door policy and economic reforms with a corresponding modernization of China's public administration.¹²⁶ Consequently, two key vehicles for modernization were identified, namely, a reform of China's civil service system, and upgrading the skills of China's executives and civil servants whereby the assistance of Yiu and Saner was expected in the second point.¹²⁷ The search for new management and administrative practices in governance suggests that the Chinese were well aware that the economic reform process required changes in administrative practices too. The only and, probably most important concern for the Chinese must have been as how this could be realized and who would financially support their goals. As Saner explains the next step was to seek for an organization which was willing to support such a cause.¹²⁸

He has been thinking of securing support from the Swiss government.¹²⁹ He further states that with Yiu they were looking for financial assistance in their home country, Switzerland since this country had large-scale development aid programs running in the 1980s which they had

¹¹⁷ 2016G02

¹¹⁸ 2016G01

¹¹⁹ 2016G01

¹²⁰ 2016G01

¹²¹ 2016G01 and 2016G02

¹²² 2016G02

¹²³ 2016G02

¹²⁴ Center for Socio-Economic Development. Best Management Development Practices. A Benchmarking Conference. p. 2.

¹²⁵ 2016G02

¹²⁶ Center for Socio-Economic Development. Best Management Development Practices. A Benchmarking Conference. p. 2.

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 2.

¹²⁸ 2016G02

¹²⁹ 2016G02

hoped could support a project with the Chinese whereby their partner could have had a chance to learn modern management techniques.¹³⁰ As both of them are Swiss nationals and have been advisors to several UNDP and WHO programs, they seem to be embedded in quite an extensive network, and maintained sophisticated relations with the Swiss political elite and leading figures. This fact was not denied by Saner. He says that certain connections were definitely very helpful in order to go through a bureaucratic journey and finally to be able to secure funding.¹³¹ “The then Swiss Ambassador to the People’s Republic of China, Erwin Schurtenberger as well as a few important politicians in the Swiss Parliament were very supportive for their project objectives” – explains Saner.¹³²

In order to make the first concrete steps for attaining financial support for building-up a possible co-operative project with the Chinese, they drafted a proposal and submitted it to the Swiss Agency for Development and Co-operation.¹³³ This agency has been and still it is the most important organ in Switzerland being responsible for distributing development aid to foreign countries.¹³⁴ Before being able to receive the funding and to launch the program, the approval of the Swiss Parliament, to which the SDC is accountable, was inevitable.¹³⁵ “This was the most critical phase as the approval of the Swiss Parliament was needed and fortunately we had support from certain politicians which was very important for being able to convince the responsible committee of the Parliament – points out Saner.¹³⁶ Finally, the Swiss Parliament approved the program, the financial support has been provided by the SDC and the Sino-Swiss Management Training Program was about to begin.¹³⁷ In 1992, the contracts have been signed between the SDC and CSEND as well as between the SDC and the Chinese partner whereby the core training objectives had been laid down in close co-operation with the Chinese partner.¹³⁸ Leading members of the Organization Department of the CCP went to Bern to sign these legal documents. The program, called the first phase of the SSMTP, was officially launched in 1994 by the arrival of foreign experts at China.¹³⁹

The first phase of the SSMTP was running until 1996 and provided the Chinese participants with a more direct opportunity to examine the benefits of AL, than any project of this kind in the distant past, as participants were exposed to learn about modern management techniques while not just observing the application of AL but also by applying themselves this participatory learning method. Although the Swiss government’s development aid covered the large part of the financial expenses with approximately 3.3 million Swiss francs provided via the SDC¹⁴⁰ the Chinese partner also contributed by covering the travel costs of participants to Beijing where most of the training sessions were held as well as their journeys abroad where participants received additional trainings.¹⁴¹ Besides making some financial contribution, the Chinese also

¹³⁰ 2016G02

¹³¹ 2016G02

¹³² 2016G02

¹³³ 2016G02

¹³⁴ See: Swiss Agency for Development and Co-operation. Portrait: SDC in Brief.

¹³⁵ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Development Assistance Committee.

Switzerland: Peer Review, 2009, p. 15. Accessed at <http://www.oecd.org/berlin/44031169.pdf>

¹³⁶ 2016G02

¹³⁷ 2016G01

¹³⁸ 2016G01

¹³⁹ Yiu and Saner. The Sino-Swiss M.A.S.T.E.R.™ Project for Management Training and Organisational Development in the Public Sector of China. A Sino-Swiss Technical Co-operation Project 1994-1996. p. 5.

¹⁴⁰ CSEND. Project Samples: China – Modernizing Public Administration, ?, Accessed at

<http://www.csend.org/projectsamples/china>

¹⁴¹ 2016G02

intended to participate in the drafting of the program. As Yiu asserts the curriculum to be taught to the trainees for the 3 years had to be approved by the Chinese authorities.¹⁴²

In fact, it was drafted in close co-operation with the Chinese partner whereby they had the right to ask for changes, and approve or disapprove the content in order to make sure that their expectations were considered.¹⁴³ The involvement of Chinese officials in several programs and initiatives since the middle of the 1980s up until the middle of the 1990s suggests that the Chinese took quite a long period of time for exploring the benefits of AL from several perspectives before they decided to start implementing it in 1997. As time was going by, they had better and better opportunities to scrutinize the practice in details and to conduct a thorough research. The Chinese were quite pro-active in getting to know more about AL and exploring new management techniques. In fact, the story about the beginning of the first phase of the SSMTTP suggests that the Chinese were the ones who were seeking for the expertise of Yiu and Saner, and wanted the initiation of the SSMTTP at first place which was the most important step leading to the implementation of AL. Their high level of commitment to the program objectives (willing to financially contribute and replace competent officials for being able to participate in the SSMTTP seminars) demonstrates that they were in need, and were interested in new ideas and practices for the sake of their values.

6. CHEN WEILAN AND ACTION LEARNING

As has already been highlighted in the previous section, action learning received increasing attention in China due to the introduction of the SSMTTP which offered this practice to the Chinese for consideration. Obviously the practice could not be implemented in China if there has not been a Chinese contact partner who was receptive to the idea. The Chinese consider Chen Weilan as the one who, in fact, introduced action learning to China.¹⁴⁴ Chen was born into a wealthy and politically powerful family being positioned within the inner circle of the political elite. Her father, Chen Yun, was among the eight elders of the Chinese Communist Party who were the most powerful figures in the 1980s as well as the 1990s.¹⁴⁵ For instance, Jiang Zemin who served as General Secretary of the Communist Party from 1989 to 2002 and President of the People's Republic of China from 1993 to 2003 owed much of his power to the support of Chen's father.¹⁴⁶ Chen's brother is also a noteworthy figure in China's governance. In 1988, he was vice governor of the People's Bank of China and later the Chairman of the China Development Bank.¹⁴⁷ During his tenure as vice governor of the People's Bank of China the foreign reserves started to grow and Chen Yuan invited Western experts to assist with the development of the financial system, among them was William Lawton.¹⁴⁸ His job was to modernize the central bank, train the management and build risk management systems along with investment strategies.¹⁴⁹ This demonstrates that the Chen family was quite responsive to Western expertise and facilitated the diffusion of such ideas to China.

¹⁴² 2016G01

¹⁴³ 2016G01

¹⁴⁴ Chen Weilan's Curriculum Vitae.

¹⁴⁵ Nathan, Andrew J. and Gilley, Bruce. *China's New Rulers: The Secret Files*. New York Review Books, 2002, p. 8.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

¹⁴⁷ Sanderson, Henry and Forsythe, Michael. *China's Superbank: Debt, Oil and Influence*. Bloomberg Press, 2012.

¹⁴⁸ Concert Global. On William Lawton, 2015, Accessed at <http://www.concertglobal.com/advisor-services/news/william-lawton-joins-concert>

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

Chen's career path started in 1982 and since then it continuously evolved.¹⁵⁰ In 1982 she first served as deputy director and later as director of the Organization Department of the CCP Beijing Municipal Committee, and in 1998 she became deputy secretary at the Beijing Science and Technology Cadre Bureau.¹⁵¹ The story becomes more interesting in 1989 when Chen became first the deputy director and later the director of the training centre of the Organization Department on the central level (i.e. CTCSPMO) which is the highest ranked training institution in China and is responsible for discussing possible future co-operations.¹⁵² The CTCSPMO was built-up on Western financial assistance as in the 1980s the UNDP provided funds to support the initial institution building.¹⁵³ This training centre was the one which became the Chinese counterpart of the Swiss when the SSMTP came into being in 1994. The earliest meeting Yiu and Saner attended was in 1985 in Beijing where they met Chen Weilan. It was then when being inspired by the expertise of Yiu and Saner the Chinese government was interested in thinking about launching a co-operation with them. Later, by the end of the 1990s, when Chen became the vice-director of the CTCSPMO negotiations over a management training program (which later became the SSMTP) involving Yiu and Saner started speeding up. Chen was participating in the execution of the SSMTP, monitored its development and finally assisted the implementation of AL into the Chinese training system.

It would, however, be quite unrealistic to assert that Chen Weilan alone decided over the incorporation of AL, it is also unlikely to find other decision-makers or to gain information on the decision-making mechanism over the importation of AL for several reasons. Chen's articles offer constructive thoughts which are helpful to reconstruct what influenced decisions and led to the importation of AL. In one of her very first articles published in 1997 Chen encouraged the Chinese to consider modern management training theories and to introduce training methods which favour participatory learning (such as it was action learning itself).¹⁵⁴ She argued that the Chinese training system was experiencing quality issues which could be resolved by introducing new teaching methods. Among the most serious shortcomings she asserted was that the system was not ready to provide proper means for personal development and methods for tackling organizational problems. She emphasised that participatory learning methods were able to serve these means by enhancing the governance skills of an individual. This suggests that the Chinese adopted AL as they were in need for the practice in professional terms since, as Chen argued, their governance system was experiencing shortcomings. The Chinese system lacked basic and important qualities which were long present in Western countries. The fact that 1993 (a year before the SSMTP began) was the first year when the Chinese started taking significant steps for developing the civil service by introducing a civil service law and ensuring the training of better qualified government officials demonstrates that they were in need for new practices for the sake of their practical applications. Since the Chinese training system lacked opportunities for developing the professional skills of the civil servants, AL was certainly welcomed as it filled such a gap in the system. In her later publications, Chen discusses

¹⁵⁰ Chen Weilan's Curriculum Vitae.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Cummings, Thomas G. and Worley, Christopher G. *Modernizing China's Human Resource Development and Training Functions*. In: Thomas G. Cummings and Christopher G. Worley. *Organization Development and Change*. Cengage Learning, 2009.

¹⁵⁴ Chen, Weilan. *围绕建设高素质干部队伍目标做好领导干部培训工作* (Focusing on the establishment of high-quality cadres), 1997.

the benefits of the AL method in details and praises some of the features of the practice which shows quite an enthusiasm for the practice and its potentials.¹⁵⁵

Furthermore, Chen refers to the speech of Jiang Zemin delivered in 1996 for the 75th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party¹⁵⁶ in which the Chinese leader encouraged the burst of innovations into a wide variety of sectors including administrative governance. This also suggests that AL came as the Chinese were concerned about fine-tuning a system which was in need for new practices. There has apparently been a demand for innovations in the Chinese political setting of the 1990s as well as a political willingness which assisted the smooth diffusion of AL. Since 1997 the Chinese started to apply AL in their training system but in a different way compared to the West. In 1998, as Chen asserts, it has been modified in order to better reflect the Chinese context.¹⁵⁷ While in the West the participants are selected at first, in contrast, in China, the problem is created first and only after then the participants are selected depending on the nature of the problem in order to ensure to choose experts who would be most competent to solve the problem.¹⁵⁸ In regards to the selection of the problem, the West and China also differ. In the West, the problem is initiated by the participants of an action learning situation which means that the problem is rather an individual one. If it is solved, it can help the personal development of the person who in fact proposed it. In China a problem is identified by a group, in fact, it comes from an organization in order to make sure that a concern to be solved can assist the development of an organization.

Finally, while in the West, members of an action learning group are all volunteers with a higher level of freedom, in the Chinese context, the learning situation is designed to offer opportunity for presenting competing opinions in a highly structured manner whereby different participants possess distinct roles and responsibilities (e.g. a leader is chosen). Consequently, as Chen asserts,¹⁵⁹ the basic step included in an action learning situation in China is first of all the selection and determination of a practical problem after being negotiated with training institutions and organizations. The second step is the setting up of an action learning group containing experts of the problem. According to the nature of the problem, the amount of participants to solve the issue is determined at this phase. In the third step, participants start forming opinions, question each other's thoughts and ending up with a reflection. In the fourth phase, action plans are developed and in the last step it can be implemented. The fact that AL was modified by the Chinese demonstrates that they deeply scrutinized the very features of AL and were interested in its applicability as they implemented it in a way they felt it best fit the local circumstances.

The Chinese did not only research the main features of AL but also examined its compliance with the political structures, the historical path of the country as well as the ideological considerations in place which further demonstrates that they conducted a thorough examination and wanted to incorporate the practice into their government system as they needed it. Chen argues that AL fits into the Chinese governance system since it was not completely unusual in the Communist political setting by referring to Mao and his conviction of the importance of

¹⁵⁵ Chen, Weilan, Gu, Yun and Chen, Fei. 行动学习法及其在我国的应用研究 (Action Learning Method and Its Application in China).

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 30.

¹⁵⁷ Chen. Action Learning Practice in Chinese Management Training: A Case Study of Training and Development for Senior and Middle Civil Servants in Western Provinces, p. 153.

¹⁵⁸ Chen, Weilan, Gu, Yun and Chen, Fei. 行动学习法及其在我国的应用研究 (Action Learning Method and Its Application in China).

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 19.

learning by doing¹⁶⁰ As a matter of fact, Mao indeed claimed that ‘learning can only occur from doing it; that learning how to swim cannot occur until one swims’.¹⁶¹ His pedagogies were influenced by John Dewey’s lecture tour to China who stressed linking theory with practice.¹⁶² Chen further points out that Marxism also emphasizes the necessity of a kind of learning procedure whereby theory is linked to practice¹⁶³ which justifies that participatory learning methods such as AL can safely fit into the long historical path; the political context and ideological conviction which has been set up at the outset of the foundation of the People’s Republic of China (and which is still in place to a large extent).

7. CONCLUSION

This article examined what motivated the implementation of action learning into the Chinese central training system. AL arrived at China through the SSMTP (supported by the SDC and carried out by CSEND) as well as the participation of Chen Weilan. Compared to the existing literature in the field of diffusion (i.e. Christensen *et al.*), this study offers a methodologically more solid analysis. It also provides a detailed description of the paths leading to the realization of the SSMTP which has not yet been offered elsewhere. Most importantly, this article offers a new insight to understand the incentives to adopt foreign ideas by confirming the assumption that it was learning which motivated the implementing of action learning into Chinese governance. Consequently, it argues that there has been an interest in incorporating a Western practice in China not just for political purposes as Christensen *et al.* suggest but also because the practice was wanted for its qualities per se, in fact, for its practical use in training as well as decision-making in administration. This then further reasserts the prevailing notion which can be found in theoretical literature concerning the learning theory, namely, that governments tend to align themselves with policies that can be found in more successful countries. First of all, the Chinese conducted thorough research and a detailed examination of the features of AL and its applicability to their own circumstances. There has been quite a long journey leading to the incorporation of AL which provided the Chinese with several perspectives on the application of the practice. In the middle of the 1980s the Chinese were involved in a China-Europe co-operation when they first came across AL.

By the end of the 1980s, organized through UNDP financed programs and facilitated by Liu and Saner, the Chinese also took part in study visits to several European countries in order to learn their experiences of AL and other public management practices. Then, the first phase of the SSMTP gave another opportunity for over three years to explore AL and finally to implement it. The fact that the Chinese changed a few features of AL in order to make it fit to the local circumstances further demonstrates that they well researched the concept since they wanted to see its advantages as well as disadvantages. They also examined the compliance of the practice to the historical development of the country, Marxism and Mao’s thoughts, which shows that they carried out a thorough research in order to well-implement the practice. Secondly, the Chinese were obviously in need for AL. In one of her early published articles, Chen argues that participatory learning methods were beneficial for enhancing the professional

¹⁶⁰ Chen. 围绕建设高素质干部队伍目标做好领导干部培训工作 (Focusing on the establishment of high-quality cadres), p. 15.

¹⁶¹ Marquardt, Michael J. Action Learning in China. *Action Learning: Research and Practice*, 2015, 12 (3), p. 326.

¹⁶² Wilkins, Raphael. *Education in the Balance: Mapping the Global Dynamics of School Leadership*. Bloomsbury, 2014.

¹⁶³ Chen. 围绕建设高素质干部队伍目标做好领导干部培训工作 (Focusing on the establishment of high-quality cadres), p. 15.

development of the civil servants and that China lacked such practices. When Chen was discussing the importance of participatory learning methods she also referred to the speech of Jiang Zemin encouraging the incorporation of innovations into the governance system which further suggests that she wanted AL in order to serve such a purpose. The high level of pro-activity on the Chinese side further confirms that they were really seeking for AL. In fact, the Chinese were the ones who approached Saner and Yiu by expressing their interests for launching a management training program whereby AL was used as a method to convey knowledge.

Consequently, the SSMTP started as a private, bottom-up initiative which elevated to a bilateral, Sino-Swiss co-operation level as financial support was needed to proceed further. The fact that the Chinese were willing to contribute to the expenses of the SSMTP and also did crucial institutional arrangements for helping the program run further supports the notion that they were in need for AL. Thirdly, the Chinese had a good knowledge on the effective functioning of AL. As it has been said, they were involved in the first phase of the SSMTP where they had a chance to learn about the applicability of the practice for over three years. CSEND provided them with cases from the Chinese context instead of offering Western examples in order to help them get the most out of the action learning experience. The Chinese were often requested to provide feedback and those were mostly very positive which further demonstrates that the Chinese believed AL was a valuable practice to be applied within the administrative circles. This paper suggests that if a Western practice complies with the existing political structures in China and its effectiveness is convincingly represented through long-term, slow-paced interactions which facilitate the development of mutual trust among the actors involved, it is highly plausible that the Chinese would consider it for its values per se and as such a Western idea could have an impact on governance. In case of AL, it was particularly fortunate that the Swiss were willing to cover large part of the financial expenses and that a kind of program was designed which offered the opportunity to the participants to experience the benefits of the learning method first-hand through several group exercises.

While this article intended to examine what motivated the Chinese central government to adopt action learning it did not account for the reasons for implementing AL on the local government levels. Provinces also had a chance to get to know and to implement the action learning method as the Sino-Swiss Management Training Program aimed at training both central and local government officials. Consequently, there is a potential to continue with this research by selecting local government agents as units of analysis and examining in each case the motivations behind the adoption of action learning. In each setting motivations might vary due to the different local conditions and the distinct dynamics of intergovernmental relations. Action learning was adopted into the Chinese training system as there was a need for this practice in professional terms. The Chinese were in the middle of the reform process whereby they wanted to develop leadership capacities for their civil servants. The findings of this paper could be applicable for examining other foreign practices as well. Since China was involved in decades of a reform process and hold a strong conviction that economic restructurings should entail changes in the administrative setting as well, it is reasonable to assume and expect that besides the political interests, to a certain extent, real learning in professional terms (as this article also asserts) must have taken place in many other cases and occasions as well.

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9. APPENDIX

TABLE OF INTERVIEW PARTNERS

Name	Affiliation	Role in Sino-Swiss Programs	Date	Place	Code
Lichia Yiu	Director, Centre for Socio-Economic Development	Contract partner of SDC to the first phase of SSMTF	29.01.2016 30.01.2016	Geneva	2016G01
Raymond Saner	Director, Centre for Socio-Economic Development	Contract partner of SDC to the first phase of SSMTF	29.01.2016 30.01.2016	Geneva	2016G02