

KNOWLEDGE-BUILDING IN ASIAN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION: AN INTRODUCTORY OVERVIEW

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SUMMARY

In recent years, the re-emergence of Asia as a global power coincided with the proliferation of Asian studies in diverse disciplines and institutions worldwide. However, although the state and its administrative apparatus have been directly instrumental to this Asian success story, there is still inadequate research on the role of public administration in Asia. Thus, there is a need for exploring major issues related to research and knowledge building in Asian public administration. Copyright © 2013 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

KEY WORDS—asian context; public administration; reform trend; knowledge-building

INTRODUCTION

During the last three decades, Asia has re-emerged as the world's most significant region in terms of its rapid pace of economic progress, size of population and workforce, share of global gross domestic product, and so on. On the basis of the claims and forecasts that Asia's gross domestic product will increase to \$148 trillion by 2050 (from the current \$16 trillion), that it will account for nearly 50 per cent of the world's output by 2025, and that it will soon constitute the world's largest producer and consumer of goods and services, it has become fashionable to define the current 21st century as the "Asian Century" (ADB, 2011; Government of Australia, 2012). As highlighted by the Australian Government in its recently published White Paper, "Asia's rise is changing the world. This is a defining feature of the 21st century — the Asian century" (Government of Australia, 2012:1). This current trend of progress in Asia could be considered as the region's resurgence or the reclaiming of its affluent past before the mid-18th century when nearly 58 per cent of the world's economy belonged to Asia (ADB, 2011). Although such a significant revival of Asian progress is fraught with some major uncertainties and challenges, including the worsening social inequality, political unrest, competition for natural resources, regional disparity, ecological disruption, aging population, and institutional incapacity, no one can deny the reality of this recent progress in Asia sustained by technological progress, capital accumulation, the emerging middle class, and communications revolution (ADB, 2011; Kurlantzick, 2011).

Central to such spectacular economic achievements or miracles in Asia is an active developmental role played by the state, which, unlike the market-centric mode of progress in Western Europe and North America, created development plans, policies, and institutions placing the state at the forefront of development (Kurlantzick, 2011; Cheung, 2012). Under this development-oriented state formation, often described as the developmental state, the public sector played a leading role in development in Asian countries, especially in cases such as Japan, China, Taiwan, Singapore, South Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand (Cheung, 2005; Doner *et al.*, 2005). Although most Asian countries have recently embraced market-driven reforms because of contemporary global trends in favor of neoliberal policy priorities reinforced by pressure or influence from the world economic powers (especially

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international agencies), for some scholars, the state-centric framework embedded in Asian developmental profiles and political traditions has not drastically changed (Springer, 2009; Cheung, 2012).

In the context of Asia's global significance, there has been a proliferation of Asian studies on society, culture, language, politics, economy, ethnicity, and regionalism in disciplines such as sociology, political science, economics, history, linguistics, and philosophy at major universities worldwide. Ironically, although the government bureaucracy is an integral part of the state that played a central role in achieving the Asian economic progress (Cheung, 2012), there has been inadequate academic attention paid to the nature and role of such bureaucracy in the relevant field of public administration in Asia.

CURRENT TRENDS OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN ASIA

First, in terms of *practical public service profession*, the formation of public administration in Asian countries largely demonstrates the deeply entrenched legacy of colonial rule and the post-independence reproduction of western public administration models. For instance, currently, the major ethos of administrative and policy reforms in Asia are based on two externally prescribed (rather than indigenously developed) models, including: (i) the widely discussed and globally tried New Public Management (NPM) model representing the market-led neoliberal position of a minimal state demonstrating administrative efficiency; and (ii) the most recently articulated Good Governance model emphasizing the need for building state capacity and enhancing administrative effectiveness (Cheung, 2012; Goldfinch *et al.*, 2013). Even for low-income Asian countries such as Bangladesh, Cambodia, Laos, Maldives, Myanmar, and Nepal, the Good Governance model has been prescribed as a framework for improving public management (Goldfinch *et al.*, 2013).

In adopting these borrowed multi-stakeholder models of governance, although there are major local or domestic factors (e.g. one-party dominant politics, centralized administration, and bureaucracy-led policy making) opposing these models (Cheung, 2005), they have been adopted in various degrees by Asian governments often because of the influence or pressure created by aid agencies such as the United Nations Development Programme, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and bilateral donor agencies (UNDP, 2005). For instance, through significant financial and technical assistance, the United Nations Development Programme has been directly involved in suggesting regulatory reform, decentralized personnel systems, and results-based budget and management for countries including Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Vietnam (UNDP, 2005).

Second, with regard to *academic public administration*, the process of theory-building has been dominated by western (especially American) scholars, institutions, and publishers, which has created an intellectual parochialism in public administration and a disconnect between its theoretical knowledge and actual practices in Asia (Wart and Cayer, 1990; Brillantes and Fernandez, 2013). This hegemonic mode of building public administration knowledge on the basis of the epistemic dominance of the western academic community (Candler *et al.*, 2010) is being increasingly questioned by critics with regard to the relevance and use of such knowledge in the Asian context (Hou *et al.*, 2011; Xue and Zhong, 2012), especially after the recent re-assertion of the region's global significance in economic and political power. In particular, there is an emerging concern with regard to the underrepresentation of an Asian focus and marginalization of Asian scholars in major public administration journals (Welch and Wong, 1998; Candler *et al.*, 2010).

As in other disciplines and fields, in public administration, adequate representation of Asian scholars and perspectives is crucial to address the existing inequality in knowledge-building, to recognize Asia's local knowledge, and to reduce the theory-practice gap. As knowledge construction is always socially embedded and context-led (Kennedy and Burford, 2013), reflecting the scholars' worldview shaped by their surrounding contexts, the public administration knowledge or theory generated by American scholars is likely to be less appropriate for Asian countries. For instance, although Asian countries may have embraced some ingredients of the NPM and Good Governance models on the basis of imitation or imposition, the basic principles and values of these borrowed models such as efficiency, competition, value for money, capacity, and autonomy may not be compatible with the tradition of centralized one-party rule, bureaucratic dominance, paternalistic norms, and loyalty-based hierarchies in many Asian countries (Cheung, 2005).

KNOWLEDGE-BUILDING IN ASIAN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION: *THE SPECIAL ISSUE*

In the above intellectual context outlining the necessity, possibility, and limits of building authentic knowledge in Asian public administration, this Special Issue makes relevant and useful contributions. It covers major themes, including the origins of Asian public administration, theories and models of public administration with Asian perspective, implications of contextual factors for shaping the nature of public administration in Asia, usages and limits of western public administration in the Asian context, and the potentials and limits of building Asian's own public administration knowledge.

There are three comparative articles (Haque, Cheung, and Ko) that deal with major concerns related to building an Asian public administration and draw on a variety of examples from countries in South, East, and Southeast Asia to illustrate some general points. The other four articles address these concerns on the basis of case studies on Cambodia (Turner), Hong Kong (Wong), and South Korea (Im *et al.* and Hong). Although the recent remarkable developments in Chinese public administration deserve due attention for a Special Issue theme such as this, China is not covered here because in 2009, *Public Administration and Development* (Vol.29, No.1) devoted a whole Special Issue on "State Capacity Building in China". Another symposium on "Reform and Transition in Public Administration Theory and Practice in Greater China" has just been published this year in *Public Administration* (Vol.91, No.2). In the remainder of this section, the arguments, findings, and conclusions offered by contributors to this Special Issue are discussed under three broad subheadings.

Significance and limits of building "Asian public administration"

As mentioned earlier, there are three comparative articles in this Special Issue — they highlight the significance of building an authentic "Asian public administration" and examine the conceptual-theoretical, cross-cultural, and institutional limits to achieve this objective. The first article by M. Shamsul Haque emphasizes the historical context of contemporary public administration in Asia. He avoids the trap of simply examining recent events and trends and opts for the *longue durée* by taking the reader back to the indigenous roots of public administration. He acknowledges the influence of western nations in shaping contemporary Asian public administration but draws attention to how pre-colonial administrative traditions are deeply embedded in Asian societies and still exert influence on the current theory and practice of public administration in the region. Thus, Asian public administration is a hybrid with strong indigenous foundations but with overlays of colonial and post-colonial western influences. The prospect of building an authentic contemporary Asian public administration faces a number of obstacles, particularly the continuing hegemony of western-centric academic discourse in the field. Asian researchers must assume the lead in this endeavor and conduct more "genealogical studies" of pre-colonial administration, focus on "context-driven analysis", move into multi-disciplinary perspectives, and demonstrate commitment to building a common intellectual agenda.

On the other hand, Anthony B.L. Cheung describes his article as "the beginning of an intellectual reflection" deriving from the simple but challenging question, "Can there be an Asian model of public administration?" Cheung's immediate answer is "no" based on the argument that universal models of public administration are a pipe dream. Politics, economy, culture, social structure, and history vary between countries and greatly influence national trajectories of public administration. This observation leads Cheung into a deeper reflection about the complexity of Asian societies and state-society relations, the impact of economic success, and the growing self-assurance about indigenous cultures, values, and institutions. These developments are seen to cast even further doubt on the applicability of western models of public administration and governance to non-western societies.

In his relatively short review article, Kilkon Ko continues the questioning of Asian public administration's engagement with the western society and acknowledges an emerging demand for theories relevant to Asian administrative experiences. His contribution is to "diagnose" the current status of Asian public administration research by gathering and scrutinizing some hard empirical data on journal publications. For a region that has become the global economic powerhouse and where 60.9 per cent of the world's population reside, he finds a serious under-representation of Asian public administration in a sample of relevant international journals over a period of two decades (1990–2011). Only 5.1 per cent of articles are on Asia. Of those, the lion's share (58.7%) are concerned

with East Asia, whereas Southeast Asia, home to more than 500 million people, accounted for a mere 18.8 per cent. Ko's findings reveal a massive deficit in public administration research and publication on Asia, a fact that leads him to recommend increased activity and a revival of a truly comparative approach.

Contextual imperatives for theory-building in Asia

An important consideration in constructing and using public administration theories is the context within which such theories are developed. In this section, while the article on Cambodia highlights the impact of diverse contextual factors on the implementation of the country's administrative reform programs, the article on South Korea emphasizes the role of indigenous historical legacy in shaping contemporary public administration in this country. In his article on Cambodia, Mark Turner takes up the challenge of original theory-building for Asia by answering the question of why public administration reform in some Asian countries has had such a minimal effect on the performance of government. He draws on aspects of middle-range and grounded theories to construct his model of reform failure by using the case of Cambodia. The government has consistently claimed commitment to public administration reform, and donors have poured considerable resources into it, but the results have been disappointing. Turner eschews explanations based on capacity and instead looks for deeper political and sociological factors. He identifies these in terms of a "constellation" of reform-inhibiting elements. At the center is the institution of patronage, which is linked to other mutually reinforcing reform-inhibiting factors: weak accountability, hegemonic political regime, societal perceptions of hierarchy and power, low wages for public servants, and assorted bureaucratic dysfunctions. Where all elements of the constellation are present, significant reform will be extremely difficult, but the chances of success increase when elements are absent or in weak forms. Comparative case studies will assist in further development of this preliminary model.

The article on South Korea authored by Tobin Im *et al.* continues the focus on national case studies not only as valuable in themselves but also for their potential to make observations with wider applicability. These authors take up the general themes presented by both Haque and Cheung on the need for indigenous public administration genealogies and the persistence of non-western traditions in contemporary Asian bureaucracies. Im *et al.* provide a detailed examination of Korea's Chosun dynasty (1392–1910) bureaucracy and its neo-Confucian principles that formed the basis of its governing philosophy. Sometimes depicted as a rather primitive Confucianism, the authors demonstrate the presence of remarkably "modern" characteristics, notably "a system of formal and informal checks on the powers of the sovereign and a decision-making system that encouraged deliberation among highly qualified civil servants." This past is then brought into the present through the finding that these traditional structures and practices also characterize the contemporary developmental state and can be seen to have contributed toward its success. This, according to Im *et al.*, explains why certain imported elements of western public administration reform have failed to become established in Korea.

Political and legal bases of Asian administrative reform

In pursuing the process of constructing an Asian public administration, it is important to understand how major reforms undertaken for achieving efficiency, effectiveness, and responsiveness objectives may be politically motivated (as in the case of Hong Kong), and how the consequences of such reforms depend on a country's rule of law and legal atmosphere (as in South Korea). In discussing the Hong Kong case, Wilson Wong revisits the idea of comparative public administration that excited such interest in the 1950s and 1960s but was then mislaid during the inexorable rise of western hegemony in public administration, especially the neoliberal NPM agenda. He pursues his interest through a case study of Hong Kong in which he explores the relationship between national context and public administration reform models. His particular concern is the explicitly NPM efficiency-driven reforms of the post-1997 handover government. There is a gap between rhetoric and reality. What Wong finds are reforms that were actually driven by political forces closer to home rather than by the ideology of NPM. Administrative solutions were used to address political problems. Furthermore, he is doubtful as to whether the reforms actually made any significant contribution to efficiency.

In the final article, Joon-Hyung Hong returns us to Korea but takes a different lens (compared with Im *et al.*) to shed light on the country's experience with reform. While Im *et al.* trace the persistence of the traditional model of Korean public administration, Hong focuses on a more recent persistence of NPM-type reforms as they are reflected in administrative law. He identifies the use of NPM-style reforms following the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis and argues that they could be re-introduced just as vigorously should there be further external shocks. As Korea's economy is ever more exposed to the global economy, this is a real concern. But there are also internal pressures from the citizens demanding better quality services and from the tax payers wanting value for money. These domestic forces, he says, also led to the road to NPM-type reforms such as downsizing and restructuring in the pursuit of efficiency. However, Hong concludes that public administration reforms of any sort cannot succeed without trust in government and that constitutionalism and the rule of law are the surest ways to build such trust.

CONCLUSION

As explained in these Special Issue articles and other publications, although it is imperative to build authentic knowledge in Asian public administration guided by local contexts and needs, there are some major challenges to the realization of this intellectual agenda. First, there is considerable heterogeneity or diversity among Asian countries in terms of political ideology, governance system, level of development, incidence of poverty, cultural-religious patterns, urban–rural ratio, and demographic size and composition, which may prevent scholars from claiming any common theoretical model as “Asian” (ADB, 2011; Régnier, 2011). Second, building indigenous knowledge in Asian public administration would require scholars specializing and respecting local knowledge and evaluating the relevance and consequence of borrowed theories and models. This is potentially problematic as most reputable public administration scholars in Asia have usually been educated in western universities where they were fed a diet of theories and models deriving from western experience but which remained foreign to the Asian contexts. Furthermore, in this graduate education, the Asian scholars lack adequate local exposure and information, which are essential for developing indigenous public administration knowledge.

Third, in the current world context of intensive globalization, deeper integration of nation-states into the capitalist structure, local–national–international interaction, and multi-stakeholder governance, it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between local and foreign knowledge and to exercise protectionism and maintain an authentic indigenous character for public administration (Welch and Wong, 1998). Fourth, the roots of colonial public administration that lasted for centuries are very deeply entrenched in Asian societies, and the advocacy and practice of borrowed post-colonial administrative models affected the contemporary ethos of public administration in these countries. The path dependency of any indigenization-led reform initiatives on these past and present stocks of experience and knowledge needs to be overcome in order to reach a takeoff stage in favor of building an authentic Asian theory of public administration.

Finally, in most Asian countries, there are vested interests in bureaucracy, politics, and business. These interests not only gain from existing modes of failed governance, they also often use the pretext or mimicry of reforms based on much publicized success stories and models (e.g. experiences of developed nations) in order to cover up, legitimize, and continue with bad governance. This deceptive reform practice, which is common in many Asian countries, is paraphrased as “isomorphic mimicry” (Pritchett *et al.*, 2012). In other words, even the reforms and programs carried out in the name of generating public administration knowledge, should be carefully and critically examined. Despite all the above-mentioned challenges to knowledge-building in Asian public administration, in the context of the region's new “collective sense of confidence” (Hoon, 2004), there is an emerging intellectual optimism among Asian scholars to pursue such a knowledge-building project in the field of public administration.

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