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INNOVATION IN THE CHINESE PUBLIC SECTOR: TYPOLOGY AND DISTRIBUTION

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The article examines more than 80 winners and finalists in the Innovations and Excellence in Chinese Local Governance (IECLG) awards programme between 2001 and 2008. Our results show the main types of innovation in the Chinese public sector to be management, service and collaborative innovation, although instances of technological and governance innovation are emerging. State and party agencies at the city and county levels in eastern China appear to be more innovative than their counterparts at other levels in central and western China. We identify several factors that affect innovation in China, and find the country to have some distinct innovation characteristics relative to other countries. Our analysis contributes to an understanding of the state of the art in public sector innovation in China and suggests directions for further international comparative research.

INTRODUCTION

Innovation, one of the core elements of the new public management (NPM) and 'reinventing government' movements, has been identified as one of the drivers of public service performance improvement and excellence (Hood 1991; Osborne and Gaebler 1992; Light 1998). Although its significance has long been recognized, most innovation studies carried out to date have concerned themselves primarily with developed Western nations, including the United States (Osborne and Gaebler 1992; Light 1998; Borins 2000a), the United Kingdom (Hood 1991; Walker *et al*. 2002; Hartley 2005; Walker 2006), New Zealand (Scott *et al*. 1997), Canada (Borins 2000b) and several European countries (Vigoda-Gadot *et al*. 2008). Little is known about innovation in public management and service in developing countries and transition economies, and nor have there been comparative studies of innovation in developed and developing economies (Borins 2001a, b).

The three decades since China initiated its reform and opening up programme in 1978 have witnessed dramatic transformation and change in almost every corner of the country (Lin 2008). Although scholarly attention has been devoted primarily to reforms of the economic system, political and administrative reforms also merit greater attention (Ngok and Zhu 2007). China's transitional context and unique institutional background render the behaviour exhibited by local governments and other public organizations (for example, state-owned enterprises and not-for-profit organizations [NPOs]) quite distinct from that of their counterparts in Western countries (Chan and Chow 2007; Yang 2007). There is thus a great need for comparative innovation research.

A substantial amount of anecdotal and case study evidence of innovation in Chinese local governments has been presented in the past decade (Saich and Yang 2003; Hartford 2005; Foster 2006; Chan and Chow 2007; Christensen *et al*. 2008), but the overall state of innovation in the Chinese public sector remains unclear. A systematic investigation making use of multiple cases and representative samples has yet to be undertaken in China, although such a study could provide a solid basis for comparison with existing research from other countries (Borins 2001a, b) and result in interesting and meaningful findings (Kelman 2008).

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To address this knowledge gap and portray the current state of public sector innovation in China, we have analysed the application materials of more than 80 winners and finalists in the biennial Innovations and Excellence in Chinese Local Governance programme (IECLG) from 2001 to 2008. Our aim was to answer the three following groups of questions:

1. What types of innovation are being adopted by the public sector? How do different types of innovation interact with one another?
2. When, where and at which levels of government, and in what functional areas, is innovation being adopted? Do these contingences vary by innovation type?
3. Are there any similarities or differences between China and other countries in the types of public sector innovation pursued?

The objective of this paper is to describe and analyse the state of the art in public sector innovation in China, with a particular focus on its types and distribution. We first review the context of political and administrative reforms in China and the literature on innovation types in the public sector, followed by a description of the data and methods employed in the study presented herein. We then present the findings of our analysis and discuss their implications for public sector innovation. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the contributions this paper makes to the literature and directions for future research.

POLITICAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE REFORM IN THE CHINESE CONTEXT

As China has undergone a series of reforms in its transition from a centrally planned to a market economy, the functions and operation of government have been reshaped to provide harmonious coexistence with and sufficient support for the new economic system (Burns 1993). The country's unprecedented economic growth has been accompanied by dramatic political and administrative reform, which is usually labelled 'reform with Chinese characteristics' (Aufrecht and Li 1995). The 'crossing the river by feeling the stones' and trial-and-error models of reform constitute the core of administrative reform in China, and the bottom-up approach has generally been preferred to the top-down approach (Ngok and Zhu 2007). Although the central government has implemented several administrative reforms in recent decades, Chan and Chow (2007) consider the 'learning by doing pattern' adopted by local governments to be more effective. The diffusion and institutionalization of innovation in the Chinese administrative system are characterized by local experimentation and central decision making. Behaviour that was forbidden by the orthodox socialist regime has gradually become permissible in the era of reform, opening a potential policy window for local government innovators. When various types of innovation are successfully adopted, implemented and diffused at the regional level, and demonstrate potentially sustainable utility, they are more likely to be accepted and institutionalized as national policy at the central government level. This pattern of innovation implies that greater attention should be paid to idea generation and innovation adoption by local governments.

Contrary to the situation in most Western democracies, in the Chinese bureaucratic system there is no clear-cut political-administrative dichotomy, and it is thus difficult to distinguish between political change and administrative reform. Accordingly, this study of innovation at the local government level in China incorporates both political

and administrative changes. Intertwined political-administrative relationships and weak democratic accountability mean that powerful officials are the key initiators of local government innovation. Although innovative behaviour is generally risky, a number of local governments and their officials are still motivated to engage in it. The hidden rationale for doing so lies in the novel arrangement of public management systems in China, particularly their fiscal and personnel aspects. Fiscal decentralization and cadre personnel management are the core means by which the central government supplies local government officials with powerful incentives to compete in what can be called a tournament for fiscal revenue and economic development, the reward for which is career advancement (Tsui and Wang 2008).

Since the tax system was reformed in 1994, the relative distribution of fiscal revenue by local governments has shrunk whereas the redistributive power of the central government has grown rapidly. Local governments have to increase fiscal revenue to pursue economic development, and what is beneficial for the growth of local enterprises and the incomes of local residents is generally also beneficial for local governments. Deregulation and innovation in public service delivery are increasingly accepted as necessary by local governments pursuing economic development. However, fiscal decentralization cannot work effectively without sufficient incentives from the personnel management system, since in contemporary Chinese officialdom climbing the hierarchical ladder is more or less the sole means by which local cadres can advance their careers (Li and Zhou 2005). Local cadres would be more likely to extend a helping hand than a grabbing hand if greater weight were placed on creativity and performance than on favouritism in promotion decisions. In sum, both fiscal and political measures contribute to creativity inspiration at the local government level and, accordingly, may provide a plausible explanation for the burgeoning of entrepreneurship and innovation across China.

As the pursuit of economic growth is considered the central task of local governments in the reform era; local government officials have the incentive to implement measures that attract investment and deliver better services to local enterprises. The pursuit of economic growth constitutes a double-edged sword, however, as it often hinders social integration and leads to environmental degradation. The 'scientific development concept' advocated by the central government, which is intended to serve as a blueprint for sustainable development, puts 'sound' before 'fast' in its recommendation that 'sound and fast' development replace the traditional focus on 'fast and sound' development. This transformation in the national guiding ideology has triggered greater local government innovation. Particularly in the past decade, the core values and concrete operations of China's administrative system have undergone rapid transformation from centralization to decentralization, from control and coercion to empowerment and negotiation, from primarily top-down to increasingly bottom-up, and from closed black box to openness and transparency.

There remain great disparities in the country's distribution of public sector innovation, although the current political regime has given impetus to the birth of such innovation amongst most local governments. Although innovation is usually facilitated by the availability of resources and a supportive climate, resource constraints and a legitimacy crisis can also serve as sources of innovation. China's regions are widely divergent in terms of development, and thus the strategies for and focus of innovation also differs by region. Although the central government has attempted to advance the 'sound and fast' development mode, governments in poor regions still prefer 'fast' to 'sound'. It could be conjectured that the developmental gap and differences in orientation seen amongst the

country's geographic regions has resulted in different innovation paths (for example, the eastern versus central and western regions and urban versus rural regions). Differences in innovation at different levels of the government hierarchy may be the result of divergences in the distribution of formal power and the operation of government functions. Finally, it is likely that the multitude of innovation attributes and characteristics results in their distinct allocation in different regions and functional areas, an idea that receives further analysis in the section that follows.

INNOVATION TYPES

Innovation, as distinct from invention, refers to the adoption of something new to its adopters (Rogers 2003). Innovation in the public sector is different from that in the private sector and deserves in-depth examination. In this paper, we define innovation in the public sector as the adoption, creation or development of ideas, objects and practices that are new to the unit of adoption (Walker 2008). Innovation is a multifaceted construct, and it is helpful to distinguish amongst types of innovation and to examine their possibly different antecedents, processes and consequences (Damanpour 1987; Damanpour *et al*. 2009). However, the proliferating classifications of innovation advocated by numerous researchers imply a lack of 'paradigmatic consensus' in the arena of enquiry (Hartley 2006), rendering clarification and knowledge accumulation therein extremely difficult (Wolfe 1994). The complexity of innovation in the public sector only worsens the problem.

Borins (2000a) focuses on the characteristics of innovation and categorizes them by policy domain, an approach adopted by most government innovation awards programmes. For instance, the IECLG programme mentioned above invites applications in the areas of political, administrative and public service innovation. Walker (2006, 2008) proposes an innovation typology for local authorities in England that distinguishes amongst product/service, technological and organizational process, and ancillary innovation. Hartley (2006) argues that the complicated nature of innovation requires a multidimensional analytical approach, an approach that is also suitable for discerning innovation types. She integrates existing views of innovation classification into an innovation framework comprising seven dimensions: product, service, process, position, strategic, governance and rhetorical. Each dimension captures one facet of innovation, which allows a more holistic examination than the competing views previously presented in the literature.

After considering the approaches employed in prior research, we have adopted an innovation typology that we believe takes into account the characteristics of the Chinese public sector. It includes five types of innovation, as illustrated in figure 1 and discussed in the paragraphs that follow.

Service innovation

Product/goods innovation is not applicable to the public sector, which focuses on public service delivery rather than product manufacturing (Damanpour *et al*. 2009). Service innovation is thus one key type of innovation in our analysis. Public service innovation may relate to the supply of new services to new users, the delivery of existing services to new users or the supply of new services to existing users, which represent three types of service innovation: total, expansionary and evolutionary, respectively (Osborne and Flynn 1997). Examples of service innovation awarded by the IECLG programme (see the appendix for the full list) include the 'Loving Care Supermarket' initiated by the Jialian Street Office, Siming District, Xiamen City, Fujian Province (Case c4) and the 'Urban Rural

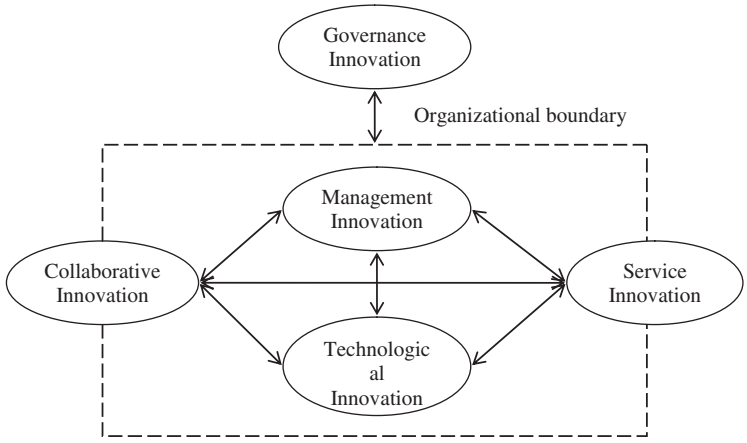

FIGURE 1 *Innovation types in the Chinese public sector*

Migrant Worker Centres' created by the Longhua District, Haikou City, Hainan Province (Case b3). The former, an example of evolutionary innovation, established a platform for the donation of essentials to the urban poor, and the latter, an example of expansionary innovation, was aimed at protecting the rights of rural migrant workers.

Technological innovation

Process innovation can be divided into technological and management process innovation. Technological innovation, as distinct from administrative/organizational/management innovation, involves a change in service delivery technologies or arrangements. Amongst service organizations, technological process innovation primarily involves the adoption of information technology (IT) (Walker 2006). IT has been involved in much of the innovation witnessed in the past few decades. It facilitates information exchange and communications within government and between government and the citizenry. The market-oriented approach of the NPM movement, in which commercialization, contracting out and outsourcing have become increasingly prevalent, has arguably facilitated faster and greater technological innovation, particularly in the public utility sector. The 'Online Supervision in Budget Execution' programme initiated by Chengdu City, Sichuan Province (Case d18) and the 'Internet-mediated Interactions between Government and Citizens' programme advocated by Wuhu City, Anhui Province (Case c18) are examples of technological innovation that utilizes IT for administrative purposes.

Management innovation

Management innovation is defined as the restructuring of organizational structures and management processes and practices (Walker 2008). Although management innovation is also a type of process innovation, it is distinct from technological innovation. The former concerns the adoption of new elements in management systems, whereas the latter primarily concerns the newness of operational processes or the means of service delivery (Birkinshaw *et al*. 2008; Damanpour *et al*. 2009). The adoption of total quality management (TQM), results-based management, strategic human resource management (SHRM), restructuring and empowerment, are all examples of management innovations. Examples of such innovation in the public sector include the 'Street Administration System

Innovations' launched by the Lugu Community, Shijingshan District, Beijing Municipality (Case c1) and the 'Social Conflict Mediation Centre' established by the Judicial Administration of Pudong New District, Shanghai Municipality (Case a2). New organizations and management systems were created to resolve new public issues in both cases.

Collaborative innovation

Damanpour's (1987) 'ancillary innovation' and Mandell and Steelman's (2003) 'interorganizational innovation' are combined in our analysis as 'collaborative innovation', which is defined as boundary-spanning activities in the process of service delivery and management (for example, alliances, partnerships, collaborations and networking). Collaborative innovation is not limited to governments or their agencies, but increasingly involves collaboration with NPOs and private enterprises. The 'Joint Emergency Response System' developed by Nanning City, Guangxi Autonomous Region (Case b1) and the 'Market-oriented Reform of Public Utilities' launched in Shenzhen City, Guangdong Province (Case b6) are both examples of collaborative innovation.

Governance innovation

Governance innovation is distinct from product, service and process innovation and deserves greater research attention (Moore and Hartley 2008). We define it as new approaches and practices that aim to manage democratic institutions, trigger citizen participation and fight corruption. Governance innovation is more political and polycentric in nature than the other types of innovation discussed here, and it has increasingly become a prerequisite for in-depth administrative reforms (Ngok and Zhu 2007). As argued above, such innovation is now prevalent in developing countries and transition economies due to the changing nature of their political systems, and can be found in grassroots democratic elections, public engagement, and administrative delegation (Saich and Yang 2003; Foster 2006). The intertwined political-administrative relationships in China have resulted in widespread governance innovation, for example, in grassroots democracy, greater openness and transparency, decentralization and empowerment, marketization and outsourcing, e-Government, and so on. The 'Democratic Consultation' initiated in Wenlin County, Zhejiang Province (Case b7) and the 'Village Governance Model' adopted by Qingxian County, Hebei Province (Case c22) both garnered IECLG awards for their governance innovation. Both have enhanced the democratic process at the rural grassroots level by encouraging greater public participation and bottom-up accountability.

METHODS

Sampling approach

The study reported in this paper analysed the programme application materials and case studies of 83 award winners and finalists from the biennial IECLG programme between 2001 and 2008 (for a summary, see table 1 and for the full list, see the appendix). This programme is similar to the Innovations in the American Government Awards Program in the United States (Borins 2000a, b) and the Beacon Scheme in the United Kingdom (Hartley 2005). These examples of creative policy or programme initiatives were carefully selected from more than 1100 applications by an expert committee composed of distinguished academics and practitioners, and they may be considered representative of public sector innovation in contemporary China (Saich and Yang 2003).

The IECLG programme was jointly initiated in 2000 by the Central Compilation & Translation Bureau's China Centre for Comparative Politics and Economics (CCCPE), the

TABLE 1 *Description of applicants, finalists and awards in the IECLG programme*

	Total applicants	Finalists	Awards
No. 1 (2001–2002)	325	10	10
No. 2 (2003–2004)	245	8	10
No. 3 (2005–2006)	283	15	10
No. 4 (2007–2008)	337	10	10
Total	1180	43	40

Source: This table is adapted from the summary provided on the IECLG programme (http://www.chinainnovations.org/), with permission.

Centre of Comparative Studies on Political Parties (CCSPP) at the Party School of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC), and the Centre of China Government Innovations (CCGI) at Peking University. Four rounds of the biennial awards programme took place between 2001 and 2008, with the fifth round in 2009 independently sponsored by the CCGI. The procedures of the fifth round have been significantly changed, and we only examined the first four rounds of the programme for comparability. The IECLG prize programme is widely acknowledged both within and outside China as a pioneer in the promotion of reform and innovation at the local government level. In the first four rounds considered here, approximately 1200 applications from more than 500 local governments or quasi-governments at the provincial, city, county, township and village level were submitted, producing 40 winners and 43 finalists.

The programme's aim is to encourage, communicate, and disseminate local government reforms and innovation, particularly in the areas of public governance, public administration and public service delivery. Its procedures are as follows. The initial call for applications is made via the national media, and all local governments and public organizations (for example, CCP party committees, local governments and their agencies, people's congresses and political consultative committees, and NPOs) are eligible to apply for the awards, and the programme committee also accepts nominations from experts. All applications are screened by a programme researcher, and about 90 candidates are selected on the basis of six criteria: innovativeness, promise of public participation, effectiveness, significance, economy, and potential for replication. An expert committee then selects a shortlist of 20–30 finalists from this candidate list. The programme researchers then carry out independent site visits and a field survey of the finalists, after which they prepare evaluation reports that constitute the main evidence for final selection. Finalists are invited to attend the awards ceremony and give a presentation on their innovative programmes, and the national selection committee then votes to determine the 10 winners and 10 finalists, who receive prizes of up to RMB 50,000 (about US$7500) and RMB 10,000 (about US$1500), respectively.

The formally stated impetus for each innovation application or nomination received, as well as information on policy issues, beneficiaries, creative aspects, effectiveness and background, provides the main body of information for our analysis. The information supplied by the applicants is reviewed in the subsequent case study reports prepared by the programme researchers, thus ensuring its reliability for use in our research.

Some methodologists have criticized the best practices research approach, in which only successful innovations are selected and analysed, for its lack of comparability and generalizability (Bretschneider *et al*. 2005; Kelman 2008). Although the winners

and finalists in the IECLG programme constitute a relatively small sample of innovative governments in China, we consider them to provide a reliable basis for analysis of Chinese public sector innovation. The call for applications and programme procedures are widely covered by the national media, which makes it likely that all of those eligible to participate in the programme are well informed. The innovativeness and representativeness of the finalists and winners are guaranteed by the expertise of the committee and robustness of the selection procedure. Lastly, the approach adopted for our research has already been employed and verified by several studies (for example, Borins 2000b, 2001a), adding to the value of our findings for comparative research.

Procedure

Our unit of analysis is the individual innovative programme, although the programme context and the organization introducing it are also examined in each case. The sample innovative programmes were coded and analysed using the content analysis method for multi-case materials (Light 1998; Borins 2000a). A draft codebook was developed in line with the classifications arising from our literature review. We then randomly selected two cases (one winner and one finalist) from each of the four rounds of awards, giving us eight pilot cases in which to test the validity of our codebook. Two of the authors independently coded these cases and then compared their results to test the consistency and appropriateness of the coding and codebook. They went back to the source material whenever there was a disagreement, and the third author also recoded the cases to be confident that they were right. This approach afforded us the opportunity to modify the codebook, and we then formally coded all of the cases in accordance with our improved codebook following the aforementioned procedure. The approach is similar to that adopted by other studies examining competitive awards programmes to identify and describe innovation in the public sector (for example, Borins 2000a).

The next step was to examine innovation types and their distribution in terms of a variety of dimensions. We identified the year in which each innovation programme was initiated to compile their time distribution. We also employed the standard socioeconomic trichotomy approach to record the geographic distribution of innovation types across China, coding them as eastern, central or western regions. The 11 eastern provinces of Beijing, Fujian, Guangdong, Hainan, Hebei, Jiangsu, Liaoning, Shandong, Shanghai, Tianjin and Zhejiang are commonly regarded as the most developed, whereas the 12 western provinces of Chongqing, Gansu, Guangxi, Guizhou, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Qinghai, Shaanxi, Sichuan, Tibet, Xinjiang and Yunnan are the least. The remaining eight provinces, Anhui, Heilongjiang, Henan, Hubei, Hunan, Jiangxi, Jilin and Shanxi, fall in the middle, both geographically and socio-economically. Prior research has shown environmental factors (particularly limited resources) to be highly correlated with innovation (Walker 2008), and we also take the urban-rural dichotomy into account in our analysis of the distribution of innovation in the target populations.

In contrast to the central/federal-state/regional-local government arrangement that prevails in most Western countries, China's government hierarchy has five formal levels: central, provincial, prefecture or city, county and township. All levels below the central level are defined here as local governments, and autonomic agencies at the village/community level (grass roots level) are referred to as quasi-governments. According to the most up-to-date data from the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2009), China has 23 provinces (these data include Taiwan as a province), five autonomous regions, four municipalities and two special administrative regions (Hong Kong and Macao), which

are further divided into 333 prefectures or cities, 2,859 counties, districts or cities at the county level, 40,813 towns or street communities, and tens of thousands of villages or communities.

The power distribution amongst different sectors in China's political system is complicated and overlapping (in contrast to the separation of powers common in the West). The party committees of the CCP represent the underlying authority at each level, with the government the executive organ. The People's Congress has the authority of a legislature with elements of representative democracy, but its influence is still developing. In addition, NPOs are not totally independent of the public sector.

In the next section, we first describe the types of innovation identified and their distribution by frequency and percentage. We then apply cross-tabulations and statistical tests to examine the linkages across innovation types and distributions. Finally, we employ Borins's (2000b, 2001a) data in preliminary comparative analysis of innovation types in China, the United States, Canada and Commonwealth countries.

RESULTS

Innovation types in the Chinese public sector

Most of the innovation in China's public sector can be categorized as management innovation (27.7 per cent), as shown in table 2. Most management innovation at the local government level involves the re-engineering of administrative processes and practices with the aim of reducing costs and improving efficiency, for instance, the establishment of new administrative centres, integration of traditionally distributed functions and restructuring of redundant agencies. Collaborative and service innovation are also common in China's public sector, accounting for 24.6 per cent and 20.5 per cent, respectively, of the innovation types seen in the initiatives examined here. Many innovative initiatives are sponsored by several organizations at different levels by means of alliances, cooperation and contracts to obtain collaborative benefits. Public service delivery is increasingly important for local government, particularly since 2007 in the wake of the central government's advocacy of 'service-oriented government'. The adoption of one-stop services, electronic tax payment and social security provision for migrant workers are examples of service innovation. Governance (15.9 per cent) and technological innovation (11.3 per cent) are also both relatively common in the public sector, attracting considerable public attention. Most examples of governance innovation involve electoral reforms at the grassroots level, whether within party committees or tied to the people's congresses. IT is also increasingly being adopted and integrated into existing operational and management systems, and privatization and public-private partnerships are also key forms of technological innovation.

Innovation is an umbrella concept that incorporates different types which often develop in conjunction with one another (Walker 2008). The innovation type variables are all binominal, rendering traditional correlation analysis unsuitable. Proximity analysis is adopted instead to examine the coexistence and interdependence of innovation types (see table 3). The results show service innovation to be positively correlated with technological innovation, implying that the two often go hand in hand. Although service and management innovation are not highly correlated, both are associated with collaborative innovation, demonstrating the need for cooperation in these arenas. Interestingly, governance innovation is the only type of innovation to be negatively correlated with the other types, thus implying that it is distinct (Moore and Hartley 2008).

TABLE 2 *Types of public sector innovation in China and other countries*

	China 2001–2008		US 1990–98		Canada 1990–1994		Commonwealth, advanced countries 1998, 2000		Commonwealth, developing countries 1998, 2000	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Service innovation	40	20.5	87	10.2	3	4.3	20	10.9	2	2.6
Technological innovation	22	11.3	218	25.8	15	21.4	79	42.9	22	30.5
Management innovation	54	27.7	80	9.5	10	14.3	21	11.6	11	15.4
Governance innovation	31	15.9	250	29.5	10	14.3	30	16.1	23	32.3
Collaborative innovation	48	24.6	212	25.0	32	45.7	34	18.5	14	19.2
Total number or percentage	195	100	847	100	69	100	184	100	72	100
Number of observations	83		321		33		56		27	

Source: Data for the United States and Commonwealth countries (both advanced and developing) are taken from S. Borins. 2001a.'Public Management Innovation in Economically Advanced and Developing Countries', *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 67, 4, 719; the data for Canada are taken from S. Borins. 2000b.'What Border? Public Management Innovation in the United States and Canada', *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 19, 1, 51, with permission.
Notes: The column on the left-hand side gives the number of innovation programmes displaying a particular type, whereas that on the right-hand side gives the percentage. One innovation programme may display any of the five types, and thus the total numbers are usually larger than 100.

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TABLE 3 *Proximity matrix amongst innovation types in the Chinese public sector*

	Service innovation	Technological innovation	Management innovation	Governance innovation
Technological innovation	.240			
Management innovation	.151	.039		
Governance innovation	−.446	−.464	−.479	
Collaborative innovation	.238	.071	.346	−.299

TABLE 4 *Types of innovation in the Chinese public sector by geographic distribution*

	Eastern region (%)	Central region (%)	Western region (%)
Service innovation	30.1	8.4	9.6
Technological innovation	18.1	1.2	7.2
Management innovation	42.2	10.8	12.0
Governance innovation	18.1	7.2	12.0
Collaborative innovation	33.7	10.8	13.3
Total percentage	57.8	16.9	25.3

Innovation distribution in the Chinese public sector

Most of the innovation initiatives examined in this study were launched at the end of the 20th century or beginning of the 21st century, with the 2001–2004 period accounting for more than half. One explanation is of course the timing of the IECLG awards programme, which was launched in 2000. The geographic distribution of innovation in the Chinese public sector also appears to be influenced by the socioeconomic landscape, with the more developed regions generating relatively more innovation initiatives (see table 4), the east coast provinces alone accounting for nearly 60 per cent. Zhejiang Province, for example, has received an IECLG award 13 times, with approximately three winners per round. However, it should be noted that some of the inland provinces also demonstrate an above-average degree of innovativeness, Sichuan Province (10) and Guangxi Province (5) in particular. Although much less innovative than the eastern region, the western region is more innovative than the central region (25 per cent and 17 per cent, respectively). As previously noted, resource-based theory posits innovation as a resource-dependent activity, but a disadvantaged position in this regard has also been shown to stimulate creativity (Saich and Yang 2003).

Cross-tabulations were run to examine the distribution of innovation types amongst the diverse regions, hierarchies and sectors under study (see table 4). All types were more common in the eastern than western and central regions. More examples of management and collaborative innovation were found in the eastern and central regions, whereas no significant differences in innovation type were found in the western region.

As table 5 demonstrates, nearly 58 per cent of the innovation programmes examined were urban-based, with 42 per cent rural-based. The public sector in both urban and rural areas has engaged in innovation, but the former areas have been relatively more creative. Management and collaborative innovation are more prevalent in urban areas, whereas governance innovation is relatively more common in rural areas. Almost all instances of technological innovation were found in urban areas, partially due to the costliness of technology use in rural areas. About one-third of the governance innovation

TABLE 5 *Types of innovation in the Chinese public sector by target population*

	Urban (%)	Rural (%)
Service innovation	28.9	19.3
Technological innovation	25.3	1.2
Management innovation	45.8	19.3
Governance innovation	12.0	25.3
Collaborative innovation	37.3	20.5
Total percentage	57.8	42.2

TABLE 6 *Types of innovation in the Chinese public sector by hierarchical level*

	Province (%)	Prefecture (%)	County (%)	Township (%)	Village (%)
Service innovation	7.2	14.5	21.7	4.8	0
Technological innovation	3.6	14.5	8.4	0	0
Management innovation	4.8	22.9	32.5	4.8	0
Governance innovation	3.6	7.2	16.9	8.4	1.2
Collaborative innovation	6.0	16.9	26.5	8.4	0
Total percentage	9.6	33.7	44.6	10.8	1.2

initiatives, which are principally concerned with electoral reform at the grassroots level, were adopted in rural areas.

With regard to the level of government, in the Chinese system, we find the county and prefecture or city levels to be the most innovative, contributing 45 per cent and 34 per cent, respectively, of the innovation examples examined (table 6). City and county governments are crucial in connecting the upper and lower levels of government, and are well positioned to absorb and generate new ideas and apply them at the grassroots level. Provincial and township governments are relatively less innovative, and governments at the village or community level the least. Management, service and collaborative innovation are the most common in the county-level public sector, whereas technological innovation is more commonly initiated by prefecture-level organizations. The prefecture- and county-level public sector has adopted many more management innovation initiatives than any other type, whereas governance innovation is the most common type amongst township governments.

Some innovative initiatives were initiated in several government sectors, as can be seen from table 7, thus demonstrating the importance of collaboration in the journey towards innovation. Governments and their agencies were the most innovative sectors at all levels (66 per cent), followed by party committees (30 per cent). In reality, governments and party committees are the most powerful agents in China's party-state regime. Hence, when given appropriate incentives, they are in a strong position to pursue innovation. Innovation amongst the people's congresses and NPOs is emerging, but the influence of these two bodies in the public sphere awaits further expansion. The party committees tend to adopt fewer service and technological innovation initiatives relative to the other innovation types, reflecting their dominant policy-making role rather than executive functions. As their duties principally include administration and service delivery, local governments engage in a greater degree of management and technological innovation relative to the other types. The people's congresses and NPOs appear to be more interested

TABLE 7 *Types of innovation in the Chinese public sector by sector type*

	Party committee (%)	government	People's congress (%)	NPO (%)
Service innovation	8.4	36.1	2.4	9.6
Technological innovation	0	25.3	1.2	0
Management innovation	18.1	53.0	2.4	10.8
Governance innovation	20.5	14.5	6.0	9.6
Collaborative innovation	19.3	43.4	3.6	13.3
Total percentage	30.1	66.3	8.4	18.1

in governance innovation, particularly in initiating election experiments and encouraging public engagement at the grassroots level. Local governments often embrace collaboration in their pursuit of creativity, whereas the other sectors of government tend to go it alone.

International comparison of innovation types in the public sector

To determine whether our findings on public sector innovation are unique to China or apply to other countries, we collected and recalculated data concerning such innovation in the United States, Canada, and both advanced and developing nations belonging to the Commonwealth, drawing primarily on Borins's analysis (2000b, 20001a). In this section, we first examine innovation types internationally using a comparative approach and then discuss their distribution in different administrative hierarchies. This approach allows us to analyse and make sense of the Chinese situation in the international context.

To make our analysis comparable, we reclassify the innovation categories of Borins (2000b, 2001a) into the five types defined above. Service innovation involves multiple services; technology innovation refers to the use of information technology and faster and simpler processes; management innovation is characterized by the adoption of new management philosophy and the use of incentives rather than regulations; collaborative innovation involves the private sector as well as volunteers and organizational coordination; and governance innovation encompasses systems analysis, empowerment and changing public attitudes.

We find both similarities and differences in the representation of innovation types across countries. Technological, collaborative and governance innovation are the most prominent types (30.1 per cent, 27.1 per cent and 23.1 per cent, respectively, on average) in the four comparison country groups, followed by management and service innovation (12.7 per cent and 7.0 per cent, respectively, on average) (see table 2, above), providing a strong contrast to the Chinese situation. There are also subtle variations in the representation of innovation types amongst the four country groups. For example, governance innovation (29.5 per cent) is dominant in the public sector of the United States, followed by technological and governance innovation (25.8 per cent and 25 per cent, respectively), whereas the most common type in Canada is collaborative innovation (45.7 per cent). Technological innovation accounts for 42.9 per cent of the innovation examples in the advanced Commonwealth nations, whereas governance and technological innovation (32.3 per cent and 30.5 per cent, respectively) are the most widespread in their developing counterparts.

Although the distribution pattern of innovation types is similar in both the advanced and developing countries considered here, China displays a distinct such pattern. The unique distribution of innovation types in the Chinese public sector can be attributed to its transition process and the political context, in which non-political reform is preferable

and any experimentation constitutes 'groping along'. A further reason is that the examples of innovation in the comparison country groups were initiated primarily in the 1990s, whereas those in China date from the 2000s. The rapid societal and governance changes that China has undergone in recent years may contribute to the dynamics of the innovation pattern reported here and the discrepancy between the distribution of innovation types in China and internationally.

Compared with the United States and Canada, in China, we find a distinct distribution of innovation at different hierarchical levels. For example, of the 104 finalists in the Innovations in American Government Awards Program in the United States (1995–1998), 28 per cent, 42 per cent and 30 per cent of the innovation initiatives were introduced by the federal, state and local governments, respectively (Borins 2000a, p. 500). Of the 647 award applications submitted in Canada (1990–1996), the federal, provincial and municipal governments accounted for 30 per cent, 54 per cent and 15 per cent, respectively. Of the 33 projects receiving awards between 1990 and 1994 in Canada, these three levels of government were responsible for 18 per cent, 70 per cent and 12 per cent, respectively (Borins 2000b, p. 48). The overrepresentation of state/provincial-level governments in the United States and Canada (56 per cent on average) presents a stark contrast with the situation in China, where city and county governments are the dominant innovators (78.3 per cent of the total). One possible explanation is that the different countries' award programmes focus on different hierarchical levels. For instance, the US awards programme was first opened to the federal government in 1995, whereas neither the central government nor its departments is eligible to apply for an IECLG award in China. The proliferation of administrative hierarchies in the Chinese system may be another reason for the discrepancy, since it causes sub-national governments to act like the central government and devolve innovation imperatives to lower levels of government. Furthermore, our analysis is based on innovation at the administrative level, but a good deal of innovation may be inspired and take place at the village or community level, an issue that deserves further examination.

DISCUSSION

It is crucial that we distinguish amongst different types of innovation in the public sector and investigate the distribution and characteristics of these types. Most of the studies carried out to date on public service innovation have been partially or solely derived from the literature on the private sector. Although several recent studies (see, for example, Hartley 2005) have put forward theoretical predictions, they have not been substantiated by empirical evidence. Following the path taken by previous studies and armed with relatively rich data drawn from case studies, we classify innovation into five types: service, technological, management, governance and collaborative. Our classification of innovation types is particularly appropriate for developing countries and transition economies, those in which administrative reforms demonstrate profound economic and political dynamics and distinct arrangements. In the study reported herein, the typology and distribution of public sector innovation in China have been systematically investigated using data from more than 80 winners and finalists in the IECLG awards programme. Although our analysis is descriptive in nature, it serves to further our understanding of public sector innovation in China and makes a contribution to the innovation literature.

Our results show management, service and collaborative innovation to be the main types of innovation in the Chinese public sector, although instances of technological and

governance innovation are beginning to appear. State and party agencies at the city and county levels in the eastern region appear to be more innovative than their counterparts in other government sectors at different hierarchical levels in central and western China. Our tabulation of innovation types based on several of their initiators' attributes (for example, geographic region, urban or rural area, sector and hierarchy) has generated more specific results. Our international comparison shows management and service innovation to be the most prominent innovation types in China, whereas technological, governance and collaborative innovation are more common in the public sectors of the comparison countries. The distribution pattern of innovation amongst administrative hierarchies also differs by country. Our results and analysis contribute to an understanding of the state of the art in public sector innovation in China and suggest that further comparative research encompassing more countries would be beneficial.

Two key conclusions emerge. First, innovation in the Chinese public sector varies by type and exhibits diverse distribution patterns amongst the country's geographic regions (which have undergone differing levels of development), administrative hierarchies and sectors. The characteristics of innovation in the Chinese public sector identified here deepen our understanding of organizational innovation and have a number of implications for innovation practice. Second, public sector innovation initiatives in China are relatively distinct from those in other countries and thus deserve contextualized examination. In this paper, we reveal the existence of distinctly 'Chinese characteristics' in the arena of public sector innovation, which constitutes a crucial part of the reform landscape (Aufrecht and Li 1995). Previous research has revealed a number of differences between advanced and developing countries in this arena (Borins 2001a, b), and our study joins this line of exploration.

The characteristics of and disparities in innovation types and their distribution across geographic regions, administrative levels and organizational types, as revealed in our analysis, are also meaningful for management practice. Although the means employed to stimulate creativity and innovation (for example, fiscal decentralization and cadre personnel management) have resulted in the unprecedented transformation of China in recent decades; exploration of their specific effects and long-term impact needs to take into account regional differences and differences in administrative hierarchies and functional areas (Chan and Chow 2007; Tsui and Wang 2008), as both are contingent upon local conditions. Further, the appropriate design of fiscal, personnel and other functional management mechanisms should be emphasized to elicit constructive rather than destructive innovation initiatives.

The associations found amongst the different innovation types considered here imply that successful public sector innovation requires a combination of multiple types and a holistic or systemic approach (Borins 2000a). Future innovators should consult a range of advocates in their endeavour to achieve an appropriate configuration of innovation types.

Public managers in relatively less innovative regions and sectors can benefit from the analysis presented herein and by communicating with and learning from their pioneering peers. Furthermore, advancing a scholarly understanding of public sector innovation by adopting an internationally comparative lens requires an in-depth investigation of the distribution and characteristics of innovation types within individual countries. Although Chinese reformers may benefit from reference to the Western example (Christensen *et al*. 2008), they need to proceed with caution and remain vigilantly aware of cross-national differences.

This study has several limitations. First, as previously noted, some methodologists have criticized the 'best practices' research approach for its lack of rigorous norms testing (Bretschneider *et al*. 2005) and suggested that more systematic research methods ought to be applied (Kelman 2008). Accordingly, our analyses of best practices derived from innovation award winners in China should be treated cautiously. Our findings are applicable only to our sample cases, and generalizations should be avoided. Second, although we have made a first attempt at comparing some of our results with those gleaned from similar studies in the Western context, further comparative research is essential. Third, our approach is based primarily on analysis of IECLG application material, and hence in-depth field study is lacking. Our perceptions and understanding are constrained by the content, format and length of this material.

The interactions amongst and configuration of innovation types, as well as their antecedents and consequences, are pivotal to innovation research and constitute potential directions for future research. Our research indicates a diversity of innovation types and configurations across regions, government levels and organizational types in China. Our findings on these issues are preliminary in nature, and future research is required to test our propositions (Walker [2008] serves as a good example of this type of research). Such research could adopt surveys or in-depth case studies with a longitudinal framework to collect more first-hand information, thereby complementing and helping to interpret the findings of this study. Finally, multinational research, such as that carried out by Vigoda-Gadot *et al*. (2008), that takes into account the specific contextual factors identified herein, is recommended to uncover more generalizable rationalities underlying innovation types and their distribution.

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APPENDIX

TABLE A1 *List of innovation programmes*

No.	Innovation programme title	Initiator
a1	Direct Election of Delegates to Women's Associations	Qianxi County, Hebei Province
a2	Establishment of the First Social Conflict Mediation Centre	Judicial Administration of Pudong New District, Shanghai City
a3	Governmental Affairs Supermarket	Xiaguan District, Nanjing Municipality, Jiangsu Province
a4	Initiatives for Auditing Leading Cadres for Economic Liabilities	Jinhua Municipality, Zhejiang Province
a5	Reform of Review and Approval System	Shenzhen Municipality, Guangdong Province
a6	Systems of Direct Handling, Window Service and Committed Social Services	Haikou Municipality, Hainan Province
a7	Two Rounds of Votes for Party Secretary at the Village Level	Guangshui Municipality, Hubei Province
a8	Competitive Election for Township Party Secretaries and Township Mayors	Central District, City of Suining, Sichuan Province
a9	Public Meeting of the Standing Committee of the People's Congress	Guiyang Municipality, Guizhou Province
a10	Government Purchasing System	Nanning Municipality, Guangxi Zhuangzu Autonomous Region
a11	Rural Technology 110 Hotline	Quzhou City, Zhejiang Province
a12	Poverty Alleviation Programme	Jinping County, Yunnan Province
a13	Three Rounds and Two Ballots of Votes for Township Mayors	Dapeng Town, Shenzhen City, Guangdong Province
a14	Government Openness Jointly Promoted by Four Levels	Changsha City, Hunan Province
a15	Downside Investigation Group (*xiafangtuan*)	Sheqi County, Henan Province
a16	Responsibility System for Privatized Poverty Alleviation Programmes	Hefeng County, Hubei Province
a17	Rural Public Affairs Openness	Qidaowan Town, Urumqi City, Xinjiang Autonomous Region
a18	Health and Happiness (*kangle*) Project	Kangjian Subdistrict, Xuhui District, Shanghai City
a19	On-line Supervision in Budget Execution	Chengdu City, Sichuan Province
a20	Public Scrutiny before Appointment	Shuyang County, Jiangsu Province
b1	Joint Emergency Response System	Nanning City, Guangxi Autonomous Region
b2	Sunshine Aid Project	Qingdao Municipality, Shandong Province
b3	Urban Guest Worker Centres	Longhua District, Haikou City, Hainan Province
b4	Centre for Juvenile Protection and Education	Shijiazhuang City, Hebei Province
b5	Privatization of Small Town Public Amenities	Ganchahe Town, Shucheng County, Anhui Province
b6	Market-oriented Reform of Public Utilities	Shenzhen City, Guangdong Province
b7	Democratic Consultation	Wenlin County, Zhejiang Province
b8	Direct Election of the Township Leader	Buyun Town, Shizhong District, Suining City, Sichuan Province
b9	Sea Elections	Lishu County, Jiling Province
b10	Household Registration Reform	Huzhou City, Zhejiang Province
b11	Election System Reform for Deputies of the People	Ya'an City, Sichuan Province
b12	Three-tiered Service Government Construction	Jiaozuo City, Henan Province

TABLE A1 *Continued*

No.	Innovation programme title	Initiator
b13	Protecting Women's Rights	Qianxi County, Hebei Province
b14	Government Assets Management System Reform	Nanning City, Guangxi Autonomous Region
b15	System for Evaluating Public Sector Performance	Siming District, Xiamen City, Fujian Province
b16	Direct Elections for Youth League Secretary at the Township Level	Taizhou city, Zhejiang Province
b17	Curbing and Preventing Domestic Violence	Yanqing County, Beijing
b18	Neighbourhood Services Platform	Beijing
c1	Street Administration System Innovations	Lugu Community, Shijingshan District, Beijing
c2	Automatic Approval Procedures to Cut Down Red Tape	Nankai District Government, Tianjin City
c3	Rural Cooperative Medical Care Fund	Qian'an City, Hebei Province
c4	The Loving Care Supermarket	Jialian Street Office, Siming District, Xiamen City, Fujian Province
c5	Trade Unions for Protecting Migrant Workers' Rights	Quanzhou City Federation of Trade Unions
c6	Community Governance Reform	Yantian District, Shenzhen City
c7	Rural Women's Participation in Local Governance	Hunan Province
c8	Direct Election of Chinese Communist Party Officials to the Village Team	Pingchang County, Sichuan Province
c9	Four Institutions of Legal Oversight	Ruzhong District, Chongqing City
c10	Five Guarantees Village Construction	Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region
c11	Eight Steps Working Procedure	Maliu Township, Kai County, Chongqing City
c12	Service Charter	Yangling Agricultural Demonstration Zone, Shanxi Province
c13	Public Supervision of Village Affairs	Wuyi County, Zhejiang Province
c14	Safeguarding Women's Rights	Daxing District, Beijing
c15	Building Grass-Roots Democracy	Xindu District, Chengdu City, Sichuan Province
c16	Reform of Huaihailu Sub-District	Baixia District, Nanjing City, Jiangsu Province
c17	Public Supervision of the Process of Government	Jiawang District, Xuzhou, Jiangsu Province
c18	Internet-mediated Interactions between Government and Citizens	Wuhu City, Anhui Province
c19	Reinvention of Government Processes	Xuhui District, Shanghai City
c20	Adopting ISO-9000 Standards in Government Offices	Shaoxing City, Zhejiang Province
c21	Dismissing Team and Building Community: New Modes of Villager Autonomy	Zigui County, Hubei Province
c22	Village Governance Model	Qingxian County, Hebei Province
c23	Performance Revolution	Wenzhou City, Zhejiang Province
c24	Educational Voucher System	Changxing County, Zhejiang Province
c25	Construction of a Credit System to Improve Civic Responsibility	Shenhe District, Shenyang City

Source: Adapted from the Government Innovators Network web site (http://www.innovations.harvard.edu/award_landing.html), with permission.
Note: Most of the programme descriptions in the web site above are in English and can be searched and accessed.
Note: The programmes are coded as follows: the letters, arranged alphabetically, represent the award session, the numbers the programme order as they were first announced.