



Policy durability of Circular Economy in China: A process analysis of policy translation



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ABSTRACT

In spite of many observations that governmental policy exerts significant influence on the development of Sustainable Industrial Clusters (SIC), such policy dynamics have not been systematically investigated, and policy durability as one of its important dimensions has been neglected thus far. This study aims to reveal the processes that are needed to bring about policy durability, in order to assess its impact on the successful stimulation of SIC. Building on previous work, we conceptualize policy durability as the result of an active translation process, during which four key elements of policy (actors, ideas, practices and objects) are assembled and reassembled over time. More specifically, we introduce a further analytical step through examining the materialization of policy ideas into physical objects. The case of the Chinese Circular Economy (CE) policy is presented here for the first time as a translation process that evolves from being dominated by a single agency engaged in experimental implementation to centralized cooperation implementation with a mixture of experimental and administrative features. This process features a continuous interaction of primary policy translators, their central interpretations, and associated governmental selection patterns of industrial parks. During this process, we find a progressively better fitness with the context, while establishing conservative forces against policy undermining. In this way, the Chinese CE policy has been made durable.

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1. Introduction

Sustainable development is a complex task requiring long term and continuous governmental efforts. For instance, to transit to a low-carbon economy, the [United States National Research Council \(2010\)](#) argues that climate policy must be sufficiently sustained for decades. This points to the concept of policy durability ([Patashnik, 2003](#)), which indicates the need for a policy to withstand the anti-forces of undermining or termination. Likewise, policy durability is a significant factor for transforming industrial clusters into SICs. Over the years, many countries have introduced policy programs to facilitate SIC, and SIC has become a buzzword in worldwide policies ([Massard et al., 2014](#)). However, some policies are only maintained for a short time and then dissolve, often failing to lead to effective policy outcomes. This is especially true for SIC, because they often display a long gestation time before synergies between environment and economy emerge. Industrial symbiosis, which is a key eco-industrial approach of SIC, is a long term process of emergence,

evolution, and dissolution of symbiotic relationships of by-product exchange and utility sharing in industrial clusters ([Boons et al., 2014](#)). Such a process requires reflexive deliberation and adjustment of the policy over time to fit the different stages of industrial symbiosis ([Chertow, 2007](#)), and the evolving context in which it germinates and diffuses. This implies that policy durability cannot be achieved once and for all ([Patashnik, 2003](#)); it is a continuous process requiring hard work of policy actors. This article presents insights into the processes that are needed to bring about a durable policy of SIC.

In our previous studies we have grounded the concept of policy durability in the field of policy studies, governance studies and Actor–Network Theory, and developed a theoretical framework of policy translation and a processual approach to study the dynamics and complexity of policy processes ([Jiao and Boons, 2014](#); [Jiao et al., submitted for publication](#)). We conceptualize policymaking as a sequence of events that brings a certain policy concept into practice, during which four key elements of policy (actors, ideas, objects, and practices) are assembled and reassembled. Following [Czarniawska and Sevón \(1996\)](#), we refer to this process as translation, as the policy concept and the assemblage that forms around it takes a particular form in relation to the context in which it is used,

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similar to the way a text is translated into another language. This conceptualization allows us to look at:

Policy durability: the stability of the assemblage of policy elements around the policy concept;

Translation patterns: typical ways in which policy assemblages emerge and are maintained;

Policy outcomes: in the case of policies for stimulating SIC, this refers to the diffusion and implementation of the SIC concept to industrial parks.

Building on our previous study (Jiao and Boons, 2014; Jiao et al., submitted for publication),¹ which focused on theoretical development, this article presents a thorough analysis of an empirical case to assess how policy durability affects policy outcomes. In the analysis we focus on uncovering the translation patterns, what kind of durable assemblages of policy elements they generate, and how this produces policy outcomes. We thus pay particular attention to the policy element of material objects, i.e. the involved industrial parks. These objects are part of the assembly, as well as constituting the policy outcome. They thus help to provide policy durability (Law, 1992), as well as constituting the outcomes expected by policy makers.

Chinese CE policy is selected as a positive case (Blatter and Haverland, 2012), because the concept of CE arrived in China in the late 1990s, and has been actively and persistently translated into policies for more than a decade. CE has become a comprehensive national strategy toward sustainable development. One of the important aspects of the CE policy is stimulating SIC. CE in China is entering the stage of institutionalization (Zhu, 2009). The case presents a positive result in terms of durable governmental facilitation on the development of SICs and a continuous materialization of CE ideas in industrial clusters. Our main research questions are:

- (1) How was the concept of CE translated in Chinese policy over time, and what typical translation patterns characterize this process?
- (2) How did key policy elements assemble and reassemble around the concept of CE in such a way as to generate a durable policy?
- (3) What were the characteristics of the involved industrial parks, and how did they connect to other policy elements in the policy assemblage to contribute to a durable CE policy?

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. Section 2 introduces the theoretical framework. Research methods are described in Section 3. Section 4 analyzes the translation patterns and delineates the phases of the policy translation process. The results of policy assemblage and policy durability are analyzed in Section 5. Section 6 provides discussions, and Section 7 concludes the study and derives policy implications.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Policy facilitation and policy durability of SIC

Both the academic and policy driven literature have recognized the importance of policy efforts to facilitate SIC, and many studies strive to uncover the dynamics of policy facilitation and intervention on SIC. However, such dynamics are still relatively unclear (Jiao and Boons, 2014). One of the key dimensions to understand in this

context is policy durability, which refers to the capacity of a policy to maintain stability, coherence, and integrity as time passes (Patashnik, 2003). Policy durability relates to persistent policy formation and implementation, which starts from the adoption of a certain policy concept by policy makers, and which is then developed into decisions, programs, and actions. These decisions can be modified, and programs and actions can be adjusted. As a result of this dynamic process, policy evolves over time; policy durability thus refers not to policy elements remaining identical; it refers to the persistent pursuit of applying a policy concept and associated goals under changing circumstances.

Policy durability has particularly importance for SIC. First, SIC requires local environmental and economic practices shifting from a single firm perspective to cooperation among firms. This requires a high degree of changes in organizational routines and local industrial systems, which can be expected to result in resistance to policy implementation, especially when stakeholders are uncertain about the outcomes. Thus, trust building, which is a long term endeavor, is crucial in establishing industrial symbiotic network (Gibbs, 2003). For SIC, this is complicated by the fact that in the context of CE policy in China, there are gaps between national policy making and local governmental implementation (Xue et al., 2010). Thus, a persistent policy effort is necessary to lead to successful establishment of SICs. Secondly, the development of a SIC is itself a long term process (Boons et al., 2014), and environmental and economic effects are achieved only in the long run. Stakeholders or industries may lose interest in SIC if the short term profit is not evident. In this situation, a persistent core of certain policy makers who have long term commitment on SIC can be crucial (Brinkerhoff, 1996).

Such policy durability is not self-evident. Governmental actors may be unable to bind themselves to the same policy for extended periods of time (Patashnik, 2003), leading to a shift of attention from SIC to other policy issues. This can be caused by numerous factors: changed interests of government (due to changed public and/or media attention), the reshaping of the dominant political coalition (as a result of elections), or the emergence of other urgent policy issues (e.g. economic crisis). Due to the existence of such factors, policy durability requires analysis, the framework for which is presented below.

2.2. Policy translation, policy assemblage, and materialization

2.2.1. Policy as a translation process

When the policy concept, like SIC, dis-embeds from its original context, crosses national borders, and arrives in a new context, it confronts a new policy reality. In this new reality a specific translation of the concept emerges: it is shaped to fit with the new context. The translation perspective highlights the reinterpretation and reconstruction of organizational and policy concepts into new contexts (Czarniawska and Sevón, 1996). Conceptualizing policy as a translation process helps to understand the dynamic and complex nature of policy (Freeman, 2009). Policy translation is a sequence of events in which policy ideas emerge and eventually materialize into (linguistic and material) objects and practices that are performed by actors. These objects can further inspire actors to develop new ideas, leading to adaptive policy adjustment. As a result of this dynamic process, policy evolves over time. Building on literature on policy implementation, in particular Matland's (1995) four types of policy implementation, six plausible policy translation patterns have been deduced. Each translation pattern covers horizontal (i.e. relations between governmental bodies at one hierarchical level) and vertical coordination (i.e. the manner that the policy is implemented across multilevel governments). The typical translation patterns are described (Table 1). A policy process may display a succession of patterns to form a longitudinal translation process.

¹ The previous study is also distinct in using a different case study as empirical basis.

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