# BREAKING IRON CHANNELS OF INTERNATIONAL LEARNING: ADOPTING MEAD'S TYPOLOGY TO SEOUL METROPOLITAN GOVERNMENT[1]

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## Abstract

The main purpose of the study is to refresh the theory of institutional and organizational learning by applying knowledge from anthropology to public administration. Empirical evidence drawn from South Korea's capital city supports the applicability of Margaret Mead's typology of knowledge transfer among generations. Similar to human beings, once grown-up and developed, cities are ready to give lessons to their teachers. First-hand and secondary data from the lesson-drawing habits of Seoul Metropolitan Government (SMG) explains learning paths from the United States and other developed countries and back. The study also illustrates an integral component of learning from peers, when SMG benchmarks best practices from cities in other developing countries.

Supported by the example of American-Korean relations, SMG's case confirms previous theoretical propositions that the old-established channels of learning are hard to break when they are rooted in history and culture, and, thus, in line with the tastes of the electorate and the private preferences of governmental officials. Meanwhile, the study also shows that the era of knowledge transfer exclusively from parents to children is over. Seoul has applied enormous effort/completed enormous work to establish itself as a benchmarkable model internationally.

The study has a practical application as it offers an outline of programs and instruments that can be used by an agency for successful benchmarking from abroad. The study is original in the way it combines organizational theories, comparative public administration and anthropology. Being of an exploratory nature, the current research tests Mead's typology that can be further applied in different countries.

**Keywords:** Seoul Metropolitan Government and education, lesson-drawing, benchmarking and knowledge transfer, Margaret Mead, institutional and organizational learning.

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Iron channels of learning, similar to Weber's iron cages of bureaucracy, are hard to change. Cross-national learning of best practices has become an integral part of globalization, where developing countries often learn from the developed. But what happens when the transformation process is successfully completed? A vivid example is Seoul, South Korea. The openness of Seoul Metropolitan Government (SMG) to the best foreign practices has created a unique situation where effective policies of both developed and developing countries have been absorbed. The open adoption of foreign policies is one of the reasons why, in half a century, Seoul entered the group of the world's top ten economically powerful cities and became itself a role model to emulate.

Over the last few decades, Koreans have being doing their development homework and have already become a benchmarkable example: "... In just 50 short years [Seoul has] become one of the world's top 10 economically powerful cities and a role model for other cities around the world to emulate" (SMG, 2010a, 7). In the period 2008–2013 alone, 71 offices of Seoul Metropolitan Government used 216 cases of administrative policy adopted in foreign countries; whereas, Seoul had already pursued around 30 that others benchmarked (SMG, 2014a).

Meanwhile, SMG's technological development is in contrast with its institutional stasis. Both the citizens of Seoul and its public officials still look up to the United States. For instance, an essential activity for the promotion of an employee continues to be the participation in U.S.-based internships and study-abroad programs, and a lot of foreign practices are learned from the U.S.-based Americans, whom SMG recruits as overseas correspondents. The purpose of the current article is to use the case of the local government of Seoul to examine established directions of international learning, as well as to emphasize the growing role of alternative learning paths. This article demonstrates that the era of sole borrowing from the older generation of the leaders is over.

To understand the established iron channels of learning we should look at their nature. Unfortunately, public administration theories are not totally helpful. The theoretical contribution of the current article to public administration literature is also of a benchmarking nature. The aim of this article is to draw some lessons from others, in this case, from other science disciplines. Thus, it examines the roots of the established directions of international learning, utilizing knowledge from disciplines other than public administration. Studies on learning culture occur all across social sciences. Anthropologists, for instance, have done some especially diligent work studying the exchange of practices between adults and children.

The discussion on Seoul's learning practices is framed around Margaret Mead's typology of learning (Mead, 1970). As a cultural anthropologist, she theorized various directions of knowledge transfer between parents, peers and children. She came up with three directions of knowledge transfer among generations: Post-figurative – the knowledge is transferred from adults to children; Co-figurative – children and adults receive their knowledge mainly from their peers; Prefigurative – the knowledge transfers from children to adults. In this article, the «parents» are the developed countries that Korea, as a «child», used to benchmark. The article discusses the learning practices on a municipal level that occur in various departments such as transportation, sewage, or garbage disposal.

## Note on Methodology

Interestingly enough, it is difficult to find references about today's SMG post-figurative learning, making any information about its current lesson-drawing from abroad hard to quantify. In the mass media and in the discussions with the SMG officials, the success is usually credited to SMG's innovation. Specific applications of foreign practices, foreign institutions and policies in Seoul are not widely acknowledged. Nevertheless, despite the lack of research conducted on this phenomenon, the process of copying foreign practices is happening on every level of Korean government.

Due to the lack of recent empirical evidence in the literature, the current article undertakes an exploratory effort to shed some light on modern benchmarking practices and the tools used to achieve the best outcomes. The empirical part of the article is based on first-hand data obtained during a field trip to Seoul Metropolitan Government, where interviews with the chairs of various departments were conducted. The study-abroad program data was obtained from the Human Resource Department. Moreover, in trying to find explanations for the observed phenomena, the author conducted an in-depth interview with Dr. Sunhyuk Kim, a professor from the Department of Public Administration at Korea University. Dr. Kim is an expert in Korean politics, foreign and comparative policy, as well as Korean-U.S. relations and international cooperation.

On the other hand, the information about co-figurative and pre-figurative learning patterns is readily available in open access resources as well as in the SMG reports and publications. Moreover, the sharing of domestic good practices is supported by aggressive overseas marketing. In 2008, SMG significantly increased the budget for overseas marketing efforts to 40 billion won (US $35.6 million) from 5.3 billion won in 2007 (SMG, 2010b). Thus, the discussion of co- and pre-figurative learning is mostly built on the empirical observations coming from the secondary data.

## Who is the Learner?

Before immersing into debates about various channels of Seoul's lesson-drawing, the level of analysis needs to be clarified. When the article talks about the organizational learning of SMG, it refers to the acquired knowledge and borrowed practices of the agencies and the departments. The author adopts the perspective that government officials are only the transporters of a policy from one country to another with this policy ordered by the citizens. The citizens' demand is acknowledged during the learning process in democratic societies, where the benchmarking from foreign countries takes a bottom up approach, rather than top down.

Despite the previous experiences of the dictatorial regime, the current level of democracy in South Korea is relatively stable. As Chaibong Hahm, a senior political scientist, formerly a professor at Yonsei University and the University of Southern California, puts it, South Korea has been strengthening its positions as a democratic state:

"Despite South Korea's messy democratic trajectory, it has miraculously achieved consolidation. The first major development is that the turnover of power during the past two decades has enabled all major political figures, factions, and parties to take turns governing the country, making them "responsible stakeholders". Second, the successful inclusion within the system of leftists and progressives has broadened the ideological spectrum, making it more flexible, open, and liberal. Third, "elite pact-making" between various political factions and figures, decried at the time as "unprincipled" and "undemocratic," actually contributed to smooth transitions between governments with radically different ideological orientations. Finally, even major internal and external shocks have contributed to the consolidation of the democratic system each time they were successfully overcome" (Hahm, 2008, p. 15).

Moreover, South Korea performs relatively well in the Transparency International indices. The highest is the Human Development Index, where this country is at 15th place out of 187. The Rule of Law and Voice & Accountability are 81% and 69% respectively in the percentile rank. They have a significant openness of budget and control corruption (69%) relatively well , which puts this country at 43rd place in the world rankings. Most affected by the corruption, from the citizens' perspective, are political parties and legislature (Transparency International, 2015).

The facts above provide sound grounds to assume that SMG considers citizens' preferences when choosing the benchmarkable models. Therefore, the choice of countries to benchmark is not only driven by the government officials, but also by the citizens. How SMG meets citizens' demands will be further discussed in the following section.

## Post-figurative: United States Again?

The rapid development of Seoul was not solely based on the wisdom and creativity of local politicians and administrators. The overall openness of the Korean government to the best foreign practices created a unique situation that allowed the absorption of effective policies, of both developed and developing countries. Benchmarking from overseas became an essential part of the reforms and transformations that occurred on a great scale inside the Korean capital.

The history of introducing Western culture to Seoul goes back to the end of the 19th century, when such novelties as railroads, electric trams, and telephones were brought from the West. The first modern hospital in Seoul, Gwanghyewon, was opened in 1885 by American missioner Dr. Alen (today it is one of the best hospitals in Korea comprised of top medical staff). Another example from the 19th century history is Tapgol Park, built at the site of Wongaksa temple in 1887. It became the first modern park built in a Western style in Seoul (SMG 2010a, 22).

Throughout the 20th century, referring to advanced countries remained one of the predominant logics when promoting practices from overseas. It was particularly prominent in the aftermath of the East Asian economic crises in the late 1990s. The Korean president Kim Dae-jung was very eager to emulate practices from abroad. His leadership created a general political atmosphere in which officials had a framework for the transfer of any policy (Kim, 2011).

Today, lesson-drawing and policy transferring remain common practice, with the globalization of our societies speeding up the transfer process (Kim, 2011). However, the interviews with the SMG officials showed that they were rather salient on the 21th century benchmarking from the West. Paradoxically, the main reason that there is limited information on policy transfer into SMG from abroad, is due to its mass acceptance in the past, which was almost perceived as a general phenomenon. For instance, the budgeting system and personnel management systems are based on Western models. Studying the Korean governmental structure and policy making process is very similar to studying the American or European processes. Kim (2011) points out that the Korean political system is very eclectic, consisting of many different elements from different foreign models. For instance, political structure from the very beginning was based on an American model; the Korean Constitution emulated Germany's; and then was implemented through the Japanese model. Another example is the Korean presidential system which allows the President to appoint the prime-minister, a unique policy that puts the second in command in a rather weak position. However, the check-and-balances between the three branches of government are founded on the grounds of the American presidency model, where the president and the vice-president act in unison with the Vice President interacting closely with the president. The only modification is that the American vice-president is called the prime-minister in South Korea.

The SMG's behavior today is consistent with the methods of policy learning suggested by Dolowitz (2000) who points out that civil servants are the first category of agents who play a crucial role in policy transferring. A lot in Seoul has been benchmarked from the United States. In Randma-Liiv and Kruusenberg's (2012) study, civil servants were the ones who developed contacts with foreign partners and eventually picked up role models. Similarly, Dolowitz (2000) advocated that educating civil servants on a benchmarking model is positively related to foreign policy adaptation. Similarly, the SMG adopts various tools for benchmarking with a special emphasis placed on the educational programs for the employees. The Human Resource Department of Seoul Metropolitan Government each year recruits qualified individuals for a program, which allows various departments of SMG to send their employees abroad. Being overseas allows governmental employees to improve their qualifications by receiving graduate degrees and participating in internships.

Studying abroad became a very popular program in the SMG, not merely due to the curiosity of public officials about foreign lands, but due to the career opportunities that the completion of this program offers to its participants. According to the Mayor Se-hoon Oh (Plott, 2008), constant promotion is the main goal for any public officer. Therefore, any additional qualifications and past awards and achievements could be of utmost importance in the government where competition is extremely high (there are about 10,000 officers who work for the Seoul Metropolitan Government). Traditionally in Korea, serving as a government official in Seoul is considered the greatest glory of all for a family (SMG 2010a, 17). Once a person finds herself in the governmental structures, the next most desired experience is to go and study abroad, especially in an environment filled with increasing career competition and a constant desire for promotion.

*Table 1*

**Seoul Metropolitan Government Study Abroad Program by Country**

| Year | Total | US | UK | China | Japan | Canada | Germany | France | Australia | Other |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Total** | **222** | **163 (73%)** | **22 (10%)** | **11** | **9** | **9** | **3** | **1** | **1** | **3** |
| **2011** | **27** | **20** | **1** | **1** | **2** | **1** | | | | **2** |
| 2010 | 37 | 29 | 4 | 1 | - | 1 | 2 | - | - | - |
| 2009 | 39 | 24 | 6 | 4 | 3 | 1 | - | - | - | 1 |
| 2008 | 40 | 31 | 5 | - | 3 | 1 | - | - | - | |
| 2007 | 37 | 24 | 6 | 3 | - | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | |
| 2006 | 42 | 35 | - | 2 | 1 | 4 | - | - | - | |

***Source:*** SMG HR department

On average, the SMG sends forty employees a year to study abroad (See Table 1), with the majority of staff working on their Master's degrees, rather than participating in internships. This is proof that Seoul continues with its learning traditions. However, it is currently visibly focused on the United States. The country-destination is extremely unbalanced: the majority of the SMG's staff (73%) venture to the U.S. Another note-worthy destination is the United Kingdom (10%), while other countries such as China, Japan, Canada, Germany, France, and Australia are rarely used for study abroad programs (SMG Study Abroad, 2011). During the interviews, the majority of high level governmental officials, including the chairs of the departments, responded that they have been on the study abroad program, and the majority stated they studied in the United States (personal interviews during the field trip, 2011).

A number of reasons explain this pattern. In his «Families of Nations», Castles (1993) argues that the transmission of policy ideas among states is facilitated by geographical, linguistic, cultural and historical ties. The Seoul case proves and expands Castles' (1993) typology, as well as confirms observations from other regions in the world that learned from their "parent" countries.

Previous studies have demonstrated the key role of international contacts in policy transfer studies (Bennett, 1997; Wolman & Page, 2002). In particular, Rose (1991) names both psychological and ideological proximity, which depend on history and culture, as determining factors in selecting the foreign models. The United States has become the main model for the SMG in a similar fashion. As Randma-Liiv and Kruusenberg (2012) prove in their study, the first contacts made by a domestic actor with its international counterparts are of the utmost importance when considering the models for benchmarking. Policy transfer is more than a mere political procedure; it includes the incorporation of political values and ideologies (Randma-Liiv, 2005). Militarily, politically, and economically, Korea's recent developments were strongly influenced by the United States. The Korea-U.S. alliance was the most important and the most crucial during the

Cold War period. Today, likewise, the United States remains the most important ally of the Republic of Korea.

Several scholars have further suggested that the benchmarking practices usually occur between countries that speak the same language (Wolman, 1992; Randma-Liiv & Kruusenberg, 2012). English is one of a lingua franca in the Asian region being even more important than, for instance, Japanese, because of its global representation (Miyawaki Hiroyuki, 2002). Unfortunately, the language factor is too weak an explanation for the skewedness in the pattern of the countries chosen for a study abroad trip: each year, two-five employees go to the United Kingdom, and over thirty travel to the U.S.

Previous research about international learning shows that fascination with the developed West plays a large role here. There is the general willingness of the transition countries to be or look «like the West» (Randma-Liiv & Kruusenberg, 2012; Randma-Liiv, 2005; Ivanova & Evans, 2004; Prysmakova, 2013). Koreans have a deep-routed fascination with American culture, which they equally call Western culture (Kim, 2011; Prysmakova, 2013), as noted from the observations of the Koreans use the terms Western and American as synonyms in their every-day life. They say "Western style of life" and "Western culture", yet, when the context is analyzed, it becomes clear that they imply exclusively American culture rather than European, or a combination of the two. Meanwhile, huge differences exist between these notions. The idea of a welfare state, for instance, could not be called American (or Western in the average Korean perception), because it is a purely European development. The interview with Kim (2011) proves this state of affairs, suggesting that only a small minority of intellectuals would know the sophisticated differences between Western, European and American. Kim (2011) hopes that correct perception of the notion of "The West" will change in light of a new Free Trade Agreement signed between the European Union and South Korea.

How does this fascination affect the Korean overseas model-drawing? Preoccupation with all things American eases the justification process for the adaptation of new policies and development projects. For Koreans, if a policy or an institution is American-made, it means that it must be beneficial. There is a massive popular perception that if it works for the U.S., obviously the strongest and the most affluent society in the world, then there is no need for justification. This phenomenon ties in well g with the previous studies that have shown that states often look for inspiration from governments which have proven to be successful or attractive (Mosseberger & Wolman, 2003; Rose, 2002; 2005). Thus, Randma-Liiv (2005) argues that it is easier to «sell» a policy proposal in domestic political circles and to the public as a successful foreign experience, than argue for a "home-made» solution. For the SMG and other Korean politicians, the easiest policy to «sell» would be one from the United States.

Yet, the preferences of SMG officials towards the U.S. are not built on fascination alone. The last element in the post-figurative learning formula is a convenience factor. It simply implies comfort for your family and for you as a person. Applying it to the benchmarking, the question becomes how easy the process of learning for a foreigner in particular settings is, and how much personal effort should this person put in to adjust to the local culture before being able to ab-

sorb the new knowledge. A foreign-friendly and open American environment, welcoming individuals without considering anybody a stranger, making it much easier to adjust to this type of location, versus merging with natives in a European country. Being more than just a policy-transfer source, the U.S. also becomes a convenient place for the government officials' families to go for an extended trip. Therefore, there are strong grounds to assume that personal life preferences, combined with the high quality of life, also become significant reasons why the SMG officials predominantly go to study in the United States.

Before moving to the other paths of international lesson-drawing, it should be emphasized that the overall popularity of the United States in South Korea, does not always serve as the best example. Not every policy, institution or idea can be transferred from the United States. Some vivid examples speak for themselves. An SMG practitioner should not try to benchmark the U.S. welfare or health care systems. Neither should they try to emulate American public transit. When Koreans are searching for lessons to draw on for their welfare sector, they benefit more by looking at European models. When trying to improve public safety, primary education, or environmental policy, they also should not establish the U.S. as a model.

Indeed, Seoul's local government has realized these facts and has been benchmarking from other developed countries through tools other than the education of their employees. For instance, the conservators of Sang-am DMC landfill adopted German technologies (information gathered during the field trip); the utilization of idle spaces as urban parks that encourage kids to become familiar with the woods and nature was benchmarked from Northern European countries (SMG, 2015a); shared city bicycles were implemented on the basis of the VELIB system of Paris, France, and BIXI of Montreal, Canada (SMG, 2011). These are good examples of how SMG should continue to benchmark counties other than the United States, despite the fact that the strong iron channels of lesson-drawing from the parent country are very hard to break. The current article suggests that depending on the policy sector, the entire discourse about policy transfer should be divided by the policy type.

## Co-figurative: Learning from Peers

Developed countries learn from each other; at times it even reaches the point when a situation practically becomes comical. A famous example given by Rose (1991), when American public officials issued a report entitled "Lessons from Europe"; in response, French policymakers produced a report entitled "Lessons from the United States". Which poses the question: Are Western countries always perfect models for lesson-drawing? Even though the Eurocentrics have a tendency to agree with the above, it is debatable whether the wealthiest nations of the world provide the best lessons for transition countries (Randma-Liiv & Kruusenberg, 2012). Randma-Liiv (2007). Do the richest nations of Europe serve as the best lessons for transition states, such as post-communist countries? The above papers offer advice on switching attention to the developing worlds of Latin America and Asia, and South Korea seems to be following that advice.

Even when the SMG does not send its officials to developing countries, they utilize other tools to learn from them. The Koreans have already realized the value of others' experience and have been keenly emulating certain policies and structures from those developing countries facing the same problems with similar resources. Thus, despite the fact that South Korea remains post-figuratively enthusiastic about everything "Western", there is a visible shift towards configurative learning from its peers. The SMG lesson-drawing patterns are open to borrowing from the developing countries. The introduction of the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system as an option for their urban transport, for instance, was inspired by the analogous in Latin American cities. In introducing the BRT, Seoul drew on the lesson of the Latin American cities Curitiba and Bogota (Field trip, 2011). Other examples are 'citizens' deliberative committees', which, during the previous government, came from Brazil, and the policy on banning prostitution and sex trafficking, imported from Taiwan (Kim, 2011). In reference to the latter case, the countries are constantly learning from each other: Taiwan imports policies and institutions from Korea and vice versa. Both the committees and the ban were implemented at the national level, yet found broad application in the largest city of the country.

Furthermore, the SMG applies considerable effort in gathering foreign practices through its system of the SMG Overseas Correspondents Program. This program allows a student from any country to serve as Seoul's overseas correspondent for modest monetary compensation, and submit reports on the best practices of overseas cities. The reports and policies are then considered by the SMG, which applies the ideas and suggestions it approves to further bolster its policies. Topics requested by the SMG are typically related to Housing Policies, Seoul Transport Operation Information Services, Cultural Policy, etc. An example of the latter is the governmental request to conduct research on residencies for artists in Beijing and Berlin. The information includes mission statements, strategies, management structures, facilities, programs, activities, as well as general information on well-known artist residencies (SMG Overseas Correspondent Program, 2011).

The government plans to increase the number of correspondents to three hundred (SMG Overseas Correspondent Program, 2015). The fact remains that the lion's share of correspondents are in the United States (See Table 2). At the same time, if analyzed by region, the majority of correspondents are located in Asia, which supports the case of active co-figurative learning from peers.

*Table 2*

**Composition of Overseas Reporters by Region as for 2014**

| Classification | Total | Asia | Oceania | North America | Latin America | Europe | Africa |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Countries | 36 | 18 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 10 | 1 |
| Cities | 94 | 38 | 6 | 27 | 6 | 16 | 1 |
| Reporters | 174 | 78 | 20 | 43 | 7 | 25 | 1 |

***Source:*** Webpage of SMG Overseas Repoters

Since the Chinese capital has already emerged in the discussion above, the focus smoothly transitions to the special role that Korea's closest neighbors play in their lesson-drawing. The main finding: Giant economies such as China and Japan are seldom mentioned by the SMG policy-makers as sources for lesson-drawing. Despite the fact that both of them are rarely referred to in the official settings, each of these two countries have been influencing Korean policy-transferring patterns for quite some time.

**Japan.** Even though Japan has strongly influenced the formation of the Korean political and administrative systems, the role of the lesson-drawing from that country is not emphasized by the governmental officials for a few reasons. First, Rose's (1993) idea that post-communist countries are especially willing to emulate the West, could be generalized for other developing countries. Any country which has experienced an occupation, and once freed from that burden, has a tendency to emulate others that have done the same with their invaders. Looking up to the democratic West is often a good start. These practices can be observed in most former communist countries in Eastern Europe and in South Korea which used to be under Japanese rule.

Second, the transfer of policies from Japan has been so overwhelming, that there is no need to emphasize that some policies or institutions are transferred from that country (Kim, 2011). The entire economic miracle on the river Han – a modern Seoul-city – and the fact that South Korea developed from one of the poorest to currently one of the most developed countries, is totally predicated on emulating the Japanese model. In fact, Korea's constant emulation of Japanese Policy has some referring to it as "The Second Japan".

Literature says that Japan remains in pole position, yet Asia's next giant – as Alice Amsden (1989) called it – is South Korea. Though her work is mainly focused on the economic development of the country, she emphasizes a learning process built on invention and innovation, one that spurs on industrialization. Comparing Korean development to that of Taiwan and Japan, Amsden names this type of a growth model as «late industrialization». In this model, a country or firm purchases foreign technology and then actively learns to use it, which results in improvements and even higher quality production of existing goods. In this way, a country's initial lack of technological experience becomes its advantage.

Both institutionally and in terms of an industrializing strategy, Korea has benchmarked Japan. However, the practice of sending government officials to Japan to improve their qualifications and degrees is not as popular (see Table 1).

**China.** Borrowing ideas from abroad is more than a mere experience of the last few decades for Korean governments. The process of policy transfer has an age-old history. For centuries, China used to be a benchmarking model for Korean governors. In 1872, a civil minister Park Gyu-su visited China and afterwards developed an interest in the Enlightenment period and contributed scientifically to advances of the Korean state, called Joseon at that time. Recently, however, policy transfer from China to Korea has not been as common. In contrast to ancient times, when the Korean peninsula was under the strong influence of the Chinese Empire, today China is not seriously relied upon as a policy model by policymakers, journalists, or intellectualists.

One of the main reasons for avoiding Chinese models resembles one of the factors in favor of lesson-drawing from the United States. Korean policy-makers shy away from benchmarking the models if they face difficulties with justification and citizens' acceptance. If an SMG policy-maker has to sell a policy, he could barely justify it by saying: «This is something China is doing and we need to copy it from China». According to Kim (2011), in terms of any policy "it is absurd" to talk about China as a model, despite the fact, that the underlying reasons are not stressed. Even though China is not currently used as a model, Koreans would benefit if they considered the Chinese public health care system, which is comparatively better in terms of transparency, choice, and open access to more retail-oriented policies, than that of the United States (International Insurance News, 2010). Despite this fact, the majority of Korean policy-makers are limited by their citizens' apprehension to take China seriously. Having Japan, the U.S. or Western European countries as lesson-drawing models makes general sense to the public. Even some Latin America counties like Brazil would be easier accepted by Korean society as a benchmarkable model, than a policy or an institution copied from China.

Despite the ubiquitous rejection of Chinese models, China became one of the G2, and continues to narrow the distance between itself and the United States. Chinese approaches to public problems could soon become globally accepted practices that should be copied, and then the value of Chinese examples will be reevaluated. Kim (2011) is optimistic about changes in the benchmarking preferences of Koreans. He is hopeful that in the future Korean governments will have more incidents of policy transfer from China, even though today neither the central government nor the SMG accept China as a country of benchmarkable practices. Since the time when the interview with Dr. Kim was conducted, there have already been visible changes towards Chinese-Korean benchmarking. For example, Seoul followed the steps taken by Dujiangyan – a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage site in Chengdu, Sichuan Province – when it received its registration with UNESCO (SMG, 2014b).

## Pre-figurative: Serving as an Example

If the current research had taken place in the 1980s, the interviews with public officials would include a lot more references to American and Western models. Today, however, Koreans are rather proud of what has been achieved. The study is conducted at a time when South Korea feels that it is its duty to pay off the countries that have supported it in tough times. A number of good practices are benchmarked from the SMG today.

Seoul as the South Korean capital is the city with the highest concentration of benchmarkable models in the country. Foreigners come to learn from South Korea, and the SMG strongly encourages them to do so. The SMG openly advertises its major strengths: traffic management, IT, electronics, and water and sewage services. Recently, Seoul has pursued around thirty projects, which have been benchmarked by overseas municipal and central governments. In 2009, Seoul city was awarded by the United Nations Human Settlements Program for the Cheong-

gyecheon river restoration, the SHIFT long-term housing rental system and the transformation of Nanjido from a former dumping site into an eco-friendly park (UN-Habitat, 2015). This award is a clear sign that the UN recognizes all three practices as the best world models and encourages others to learn and to follow.

Developing countries eagerly draw their lessons from Seoul's recent developments and innovations. China is currently benchmarking the SMG's "Park Won Soon Act". This document sets out a number of anti-corruption measures and controls that track irregularities committed by public officials. The Act is considered a successful practice, as after its implementation in Seoul, the number of crimes committed by public officials dropped by approximately one seventh, and the number of wrong-doings reported through hotlines increased more than ten-fold (SMG, 2015b). Singapore is learning its own ways to emulate the energy policy of the city of Seoul. Among other benchmarkable projects and policies, Singaporeans study environmentally friendly buildings such as the New Seoul City Hall and the Energy Dream Center in Sangam-dong (SMG, 2012). Pre-figurative practices are not only limited to the Asian and Pacific region, as developing countries from around the globe are equally eager to learn from Seoul. Thus, Trinidad and Tobago is currently benchmarking Seoul waterworks (SMG, 2014c).

The SMG helps interested parties from the developing world by promoting Seoul's best practices. For instance, it organized a Master's degree course for government officials from developing countries. The SMG organizes this study program as a part of the Official Development Aid project (SMG, 2010a, p. 49). Its main purpose, as stated by the SMG, is to provide foreign officials with an insight into urban administration. Despite the apparent pre-figurative learning from Seoul by foreign cities, co-figurative elements of learning are also present: through the participation in common projects, foreigners bring in their perspectives and experience from abroad.

The question can be raised as to whether teaching other developing countries is pre-figurative learning and not co-figurative. Both approaches are true, depending on the view point. This article takes the perspective that because several decades ago Korea was in the list of the ten most undeveloped countries – giving lessons to anybody who was higher up that list is to a certain extent giving pre-figurative lessons to one's "parents" (as in Mead's typology). Meanwhile, the author also agrees that the most interesting/purest pre-configurative is the examples of what the developed countries have been recently learning from the SMG, and what this local government has to offer the long-established global leaders.

Being not only innovative but also very successful, Seoul's waterworks and sewage systems equitably attract the attention of the developed world. U.S. cities are equally interested in the project that started in 2001 by the then newly elected mayor, Lee Myung-bak, who promised to restore the Cheonggyecheon River. For decades the riverbed stayed covered by concrete and was used as the freeway. The goal was to improve the city center both economically and environmentally. By the end of his term, the Cheonggyecheon was flowing freely through the heart of downtown Seoul, and the project became a worldwide lesson-drawing model. At least two river restoration projects in the United States – Los Angeles River Revitalization and the restoration of the river zone in Chinatown of Honolulu –

benchmark the Cheonggye Stream Project (City of Los Angeles, 2015; Honolulu Government, 2011). Besides the river restoration in Seoul, the Honolulu project also draws lessons from two similar American projects. So, while Honolulu officials could have looked exclusively at domestic practices, they consciously choose the Korean practice as an example as well.

American Honolulu is also benchmarking another Seoul project. Initially attained from Europe, adopted and improved, Seoul city bike system is a benchmarkable model for other developed countries. The current implementation of a similar system in Honolulu, Hawaii, is heavily based on the Seoul bicycle network in the Korean capital (Honolulu Government, 2015).

Seoul has a number of other projects that developed countries should draw lessons from. For example, in certain areas of technology, even the United States, the one-time leader in this field, bears witness to the type of reversal which often happens (just as it does with parents and kids) as it now lags behind other countries in certain areas. Seoul is more advanced in its use of modern IT technologies. Thus, the city has developed a number of e-government practices that have become worldwide benchmarkable models. To name a few, on their official websites the city highlights:

– M-Voting, a service for policy-making that allows citizens to vote for the issues related and influential to daily living anywhere and anytime via computer or mobile phone (WeGo, 2014);
– e-TAX, which is the online tax payment service that allows citizens to check tax by categories, pay for tax, search and store the payment receipts, and deposit or use tax mileage. Pay Tax Anywhere and Anytime Convenient Payment for Citizens Released Korea's first "Smartphone Application for Tax Payment" (WeGo, 2014);
– 120 Dasan Call Center, a service that allows quick and easy access to various information about Seoul with a single call, such as living information, transportation user guide, and travel information. Already, 440 local institutions have benchmarked the 120 Dasan Call Center. Also, 44 cities from 27 countries, including Moscow and Guangxi Province in China, have researched the services (WeGo, 2014; SMG, 2010c).

In addition to the E-government innovations, Seoul transit system is another great model that the U.S. could research and learn from. The Transportation Operation and Information Service (TOPIS) had more than 1,200 foreign heads of state, ministers, and vice ministers of transportation departments and numerous transportation experts visit their facilities. Seoul's "intelligent transportation system" has been constantly improving since 2004 when the city began to overhaul its public transport systems (SMG, 2013). As for benchmarking, visitors are often interested in Seoul's eco-transit. The city developed a rapid-recharging system for electric passenger cars and electric buses, based on the nation's advanced electric vehicle technology (SMG, 2010d).

The Seoul Metropolitan Government puts a lot of emphases on the City's ecology and its sustainable development. One benchmarkable example is the newly constructed Han River Art Island, an environmentally-friendly building located on an island. One fourth of its total energy is from new renewable energy

such as hydrothermal, geothermal, solar, and fuel cells. As well as this, the cooling and heating systems in the building rely 90% on natural, renewable resources (SMG, 2010e).

## Conclusion

South Korea's case proves that it is hard to break old-established iron channels of learning, especially when rooted deeply in history and culture, and in line with both the tastes of the electorate and the private preferences of governmental officials. The current research confirms the findings of Randma-Liiv (2005) and Randma-Liiv and Kruusenberg (2012) that the convenience factor in drawing lessons from one particular country could overshadow other crucial factors such as general applicability of the model itself. Therefore, the Seoul Metropolitan Government should be aware of the possible politically-biased selection of their role models, as it may lead to a democratic deficit by forcing governments to rely on foreign models chosen by civil servants. One must also note, the SMG is additionally supported and influenced by the electorate in this process.

Moreover, the context for any policy in a relatively stable country, such as the U.S., is much different from that in South Korea. Margaret Mead (1970) connects the extension of a pre-figurative type of learning to increasing uncertainty in a rapidly changing environment, and therefore the conditions of a child maturing are different from those experienced by the parents. South Korea has made a fundamental breakthrough in this learning process by becoming, in less than half a century, one of the most developed countries.

The grounds for the SMG's practice of policy transfer lies in the unique challenges it faces, different from any other transitional country. For Central and Eastern Europe, Randma-Liiv (2005) names such challenges as the shortage of domestic know-how, experience in policy making and administration, accompanied by general uncertainty. Possessing great creativity potential and considerably high levels of experience in both policy-making and policy-transferring, the main challenges for the SMG are the high speed of city growth, and the pressure from the population to westernize their approach to administration.

Ironically, despite various examples of policy transfer to the SMG from abroad, international influence on average has been rejected by SMG officials. The SMG officials point out that the SMG neither imitate nor benchmark from abroad, and every policy implemented is an innovation of the government itself (personal interviews during the field trip, 2011). Although a grown-up kid at this point – the SMG – currently behaves as a rebellious teenager. When asked about either benchmarking or inspiration of any type from the outside, the SMG officials state that innovation is what leads government reform. As the chiefs of the SMG departments emphasize, Seoul incorporates more innovation than imitation (from personal interviews with SMG officials in 2011). Meanwhile, despite the official denial, benchmarking or lesson-drawing practices could be noticed almost in every sphere of the SMG. For example, even though 120 Dasan Call Center might have some unique features and particularities, the idea of a public call center was clearly not invented in Korea.

Seoul continues to develop at enormous pace and the urgency for fast responses to new challenges is as high as ever before. The speed of Seoul's development creates a situation, where even more questions are raised, and simultaneously one needs quicker responses. For example: how does the city manage a giant landfill that once was out of the city but due to the fast construction of suburbs now appears in the middle of the city? How does the government efficiently operate a call-center in the city with a population of 10 million? How does it manage tough traffic and persuade residents to give up driving private cars? The success in answering these questions lies in the established environment of domestic innovation and creativity supported by constant benchmarking from abroad.

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