

Refereed Article

The Concept of “Political Innovation” and Its Application in China and South Korea*

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Summary

Research on “innovation” has focused mainly on its technological and economic varieties, but there are at present relatively few studies about innovation in social and political contexts. In view of the limited number of relevant studies, this article explores the understanding of innovation from the perspective of Political Science — as well as the Social Sciences more broadly. The first part discusses the concept of “political innovation” by referring to three major characteristics thereof: novelty; crises, risks, and social needs as innovation triggers; and, finally, social impact. We draw attention to the continuing difficulty of drawing a clear dividing line between it and other phenomena such as “change,” “reform,” or “revolution.” Following the term-defining first part, the second half of the article explores the application of the concept within political and academic debates in two East Asian countries, China and South Korea, pointing out the discursive relationships between innovation and reform. The article concludes with a discussion of the differences between the two countries in terms of the application of the political innovation concept, as well as between their core understandings of it and those interpretations thereof that are dominant in the West.

Keywords: Political innovation, reform, innovation discourse, China, Korea

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* The authors wish to thank the guest editor of the special issue, Marcus Conlé, for providing invaluable suggestions and advice on this article. Dr. Momoyo Hüstebeck generously shared her ideas with us, and helped to structure the paper from the very beginning. We appreciate her academic guidance. Our thanks are also due to the two anonymous reviewers, whose critiques and comments were enlightening and useful for the improvement of the article. The publication of it has only been realized through all this kind support and assistance. All remaining errors are ours alone.