



# River leaders in China: Party-state hierarchy and transboundary governance



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## ABSTRACT

It is generally agreed that traditional territorial-fixed systems face transboundary difficulties that characterize a territorial mismatch between flowing materials and political boundaries. Hierarchization, a process of forming a hierarchy to generate transboundary power to transcend the territorial mismatch, is commonly founded in terms of transboundary river governance. For example, the existing literature discusses the hierarchization of river governance in either the establishment of a new governmental agency or creation of an ad hoc committee. However, the river leader policy introduced nationwide in China in 2016 is distinct from these two approaches. River leadership is assigned to certain prefecture-level cadres, whose career advancement depends on achieving specific goals related to the quality of rivers for which they are made accountable. River leaders' transboundary powers to coordinate their subordinate officials and resources are not a function of their government positions but rather their cadre rank hierarchy within China's Leninist-style authoritarian party-state mechanism. We call this process 'hierarchization through participation'. With an empirical focus on the river leader policy of Dian Lake in Kunming, capital of Yunnan Province, we present a detailed discussion of hierarchization through participation in China, including its characteristics, advantages and limitations. This study depends on secondary data like official documents and news reports, along with first-hand site visits on river landscapes and field interviews with officials and citizens. This paper's core contributions are to enrich the theoretical discussion of different types of hierarchization that deal with transboundary affairs and to improve understanding how the authoritarian states like China initiate their own forms of river governance that are not properly examined by the existing transboundary governance literature.

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## 1. Introduction

Developing effective governance of transboundary resources is a significant challenge (Blatter, 2004; Brenner, 1999b; Elden, 2005). Traditional territory-fixed systems are poorly adapted to respond to the externalities of fluid entities that span multiple administrative boundaries, mainly due to a lack of adequate transboundary power to coordinate different inter-territorial authorities and to transcend territorial mismatches between flowing materials and political boundaries. The existing literature suggests different strategies to generate a proper hierarchy among related stakeholders to improve inter-territorial integration and coordination. We call this process 'hierarchization'. While various implementations of river basin

governance differ in their details (Toset, Gleditsch, & Hegre, 2000), the most common two hierarchization strategies are (1) to establish an ad hoc committee, or (2) to authorize a new governmental bureau. Examples include the International Commission for the Protection of the Rhine in Europe (Huisman, De Jong, & Wieriks, 2000), and the Connecticut River Joint Commission (Vogel, 2015) and the Tennessee Valley Authority (Selznick, 1949) in the US.

In China, governing rivers has been a crucial task since ancient times (Wittfogel, 1957). As in many other countries, the current Chinese government has widely adopted the strategy of establishing ad hoc committees and governmental agencies, such as the Yellow River Water Resource Commission, the Huai River Water Resource Commission and Guangdong's Rivers Management Commission (Yi & Ma, 2009). In addition, on 15th October 2016, a new national policy called 'one river one leader (Ch. *he zhang*)' was announced by the Central Leading Group for Comprehensively

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Deepening Reforms (Ch. *zhonggong zhongyang quanmian shenhua gaige lingdao xiaozu*).<sup>1</sup> Under the policy, members of local Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) standing committees are appointed as river leaders. Some of these appointees bring little or even no previous work experience in addressing environmental issues, but their future career advancement is dependent on achieving specific milestones for improving and maintaining river governance. This institutional design ensures that these cadres are politically motivated to mobilize resources at their disposal and to coordinate their subordinates to achieve the assigned goals.

Despite its dramatic economic transition, China is still tightly controlled under the authoritarian CCP (Zheng, 2010). Previous studies on authoritarian environmentalism has examined how the state makes use of its resources and power in an authoritarian way to respond to environmental-related challenges (Eaton & Kostka, 2014; Gilley, 2012; Moore, 2014). This paper aims to further link this understanding on authoritarian environmentalism with the transboundary governance discussion. Three key mechanisms within the CCP's Leninist-style party-state authoritarian regime are specifically highlighted, including (1) party monopoly on power, (2) importance of rank hierarchy, and (3) performance-oriented cadre evaluations. We thus argue that the river leader policy demonstrates a unique way of what-we-called hierarchization through participation, in the sense that the Chinese authoritarian regime can use its inherent personnel cadre-rank hierarchy within its party-state structure to overcome the territorial mismatch for transboundary governance.

The rest of this paper is divided into three main sections. Section Two reviews different types of hierarchization, and characteristics of hierarchization through participation in particular. Sensitivity to political scale in each hierarchy is also discussed. Section Three discusses the case of the river leader in Kunming, a city which has pioneered the river leader policy experiment since 2009. Section Four examines the effectiveness and limitations of the strategy of hierarchization through participation that deals with various transboundary affairs in China. Research methods include a literature review on transboundary studies and authoritarian environmentalism in general and China environmental research in particular; content analysis of related policy documents and news reports about the river leader system and field interviews with associated officials and cadres, and site-visits on river landscapes and conversations with citizens living around in Kunming City (the first time in 2012 and the second time in 2015).

## 2. Hierarchization in transboundary river governance

Territory, a spatial concept by which the nation-state exercises power and maintains sovereignty, has risen in tandem with the modern state as the foremost means of political and economic organization (Johnston, 1990; Johnston, 2001; Sack, 1986). Modern nation states' borders and legal and political systems are all territorial in nature and sub-national (regional and local) governments also have their own administrative territories. Corresponding leaders at various levels are held accountable for events within their respective jurisdictions. Therefore, the widespread adoption of territorial thinking is not only due to its use in defining and consolidating the exercise of power but also because it assigns clear responsibility and accountability to specific territorial-based

organizations.

Increasing transboundary flows in capital, information, people and materials challenge the dominant status of territorial-based geopolitics and its related traditional modes of power and accountability. Considerable political and social tensions have been generated due to a mismatch between political boundaries of traditional administrative territory and the corresponding transboundary ranges of flowing materials. *Hierarchization*, the political processes of inter-territorial integration, is a solution to producing related transboundary power to transcend the territorial mismatch conundrum.

### 2.1. A new governmental bureau: hierarchization through re-bureaucratization

Problems of mismatched political boundaries and flowing materials are frequently resolved by the creation of new governmental institutions that fits the specific boundaries in question (Brenner, 1999a, 1999b; Elden, 2005; Popescu, 2008). Through top-down processes of legislation, authorization, or institutionalization, this strategy establishes a legally authorized hierarchy in which the previously autonomous territories are institutionally integrated and commanded. We call this process 'hierarchization through re-bureaucratization'.

A typical example is the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) established by the US federal government to improve flood control, soil conservation and reforestation efforts over the Tennessee River which includes lands in multiple states (Selznick, 1949). The TVA offers a formal and stable hierarchy through the institutional reform of the national bureaucracy, and thus can mitigate conflicts and facilitate integration among administrative territories within a country. This can accelerate and enhance the effectiveness of transboundary governance, particularly if it is headed by a strong leadership figure. However, in democratic contexts, implementing this strategy requires a long and painstaking process of legislation and authorization.

### 2.2. Ad hoc committee: informal hierarchization behind interactive negotiation

Compared to re-bureaucratization, an even more commonly seen transboundary river governance policy is to establish an ad hoc committee to improve transboundary coordination power between all stakeholder territorial governments (Bulkeley, 2005). For example, the Mekong River Commission (MRC) and Greater Mekong Sub-region, two inter-governmental organizations that work directly with the governments of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand, Vietnam, China and Myanmar, jointly managing the Mekong River to ensure sustainability (Hirsch, 2016; Su, 2012). MRC has successfully blocked several development projects, overruling investors in member countries and international organizations (Sneddon & Fox, 2006). Similar operations are found in the International Commission for the Protection of the Rhine in Europe (Huisman et al., 2000). Also the Connecticut River Joint Commission is composed of New Hampshire's Connecticut River Valley Resource Commission and Vermont's Connecticut River Watershed Advisory Commission (Vogel, 2015). While the establishment of a new bureau typically takes place in a single national democratic state, creation of an ad hoc committee is more flexible, which can be used to manage both sub-national rivers (such as the Connecticut River) and international rivers (such as the Mekong River and the Rhine).

Two further points are noted. First, generally speaking, without coercive power and organizational hierarchy, the implementation of ad hoc committee policy relies on voluntary engagement of each

<sup>1</sup> Documentation title: Policy opinion regarding fully implementation of river leader policy [Ch. *guanyu quanmian tuidong hezhangzhi deyi*]. See news <http://weibo.com/ttarticle/p/show?id=2309614030522513826077>, accessed by 30<sup>th</sup> November 2016.

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