



# The drivers of local environmental policy in China: An analysis of Shenzhen's environmental performance management system, 2007–2015



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## ABSTRACT

To combat significant pollution problems, a number of local governments in China have utilized performance management to improve cadres' accountability on environmental issues. Despite the extensive literature on public sector performance management, attention to environmental performance management has been relatively scant. Taking Shenzhen – one of China's most densely populated, affluent, and rapidly growing cities – as a case study, this article describes and analyzes the evolution of the local environmental performance management system from 2007 to 2015. A series of external and internal factors are identified as determinants of policy evolution, including cadres' individual decision-making, higher-level policies, intra-governmental interactions (horizontally and vertically), the relative salience of environmental issues, and strategies in policy experimentation. The multiplicity of factors further complicates the already complex process of performance measurement by setting it in a complex political context, which can distort the efficacy and objectives of the system, resulting in an unpredictable and compromised policy tool. Improving government environmental performance management involves reducing complexity by reforming aspects of the political context, allowing for a more serious, open, and transparent decision-making process.

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## 1. Introduction

Due to rapid industrialization and urbanization over the past three decades, China has been affected by daunting environmental pollution. A recent study estimates that about 1.3 million premature deaths per year in China are caused by air pollution (Liu et al., 2016a). In addition, in 2012, 40% of the country's rivers were seriously polluted (Jian, 2012). Currently, more than 80% of the water from underground wells used by farms, factories and households across the heavily populated plains of China is unfit for drinking or bathing because of contamination (Buckley and Piao, 2016). Furthermore, about 19.4% of the country's arable land is polluted (Ministry of Environmental Protection and Ministry of Land Resources, 2014). According to the Environmental

Performance Index 2016 Report by Yale University, China ranked 109 out of 180 countries (Hsu et al., 2016).

In fact, and largely in response to these increasingly urgent problems, China's environmental management system has experienced a great leap forward in recent years (Liu et al., 2016b). However, aligning local governments, whose primary political prerogative remains economic growth, with national goals of environmental protection has been a major policy challenge (Qi et al., 2008; Qi and Wu, 2013). To address this issue, the central government has instituted performance-oriented measures for administrators since 1988, when the Environmental Committee of the State Council (since disbanded) decided to carry out annual environmental quality assessments for 113 major cities and link mayors' political prospects with the assessments' results. A recent, notable example is the "Evaluation Method of the Implementation of Atmospheric Pollution Prevention and Control Action Plan (Trial)," promulgated by the State Council in 2014. Air pollution reduction targets were set for provincial-level governments, which

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then disaggregated the target down to lower-level governments. The annual, final evaluation results were then declared an important basis for the comprehensive track record evaluation of cadres.

Against this political and institutional backdrop, since the 2000s, a number of local governments have set up Environmental Protection Performance Evaluation (EPPE) systems for their cadres (Liu et al., 2016b). The aim of EPPE is to galvanize local cadres to be more proactive on environmental issues by measuring their progress on local environmental protection issues and then using the results as a factor in promotion or demotion. Among these local EPPE systems, Shenzhen's remains relatively unique in that it has been in operation for nearly a decade. It has mature institutional arrangements and has been covered by various national media outlets and praised by the government's powerful Central Organization Department, which is responsible for major personnel decisions. Shenzhen is China's first Special Economic Zone (SEZ) and is situated to the immediate north of Hong Kong, as shown in Fig. 1. The establishment of the Shenzhen SEZ was an important milestone in China's economic reforms, and the rapid development of the city from a rural fishing community into a modern metropolis has helped validate the success of those reforms. Today it boasts over 15 million residents living on 1991 square kilometers of land, and is the fifth most populous city in the world (Wang, 2012). In 2014, Shenzhen's GDP reached ¥1600 billion and ranked 4th among China's cities (Shenzhen Statistics Bureau, 2015).

Despite its robust economy, Shenzhen has been combatting pollution problems that have arisen as a result of its urbanization (Liu and Ma, 2010, 2011). According to China Sustainable Cities Report 2016, Shenzhen currently ranks 15th out of 35 large and medium-sized cities in China (from best to worst) on the Pollution Discharge Index, 2<sup>nd</sup> on the Air Pollution Index, 19<sup>th</sup> on the Water Pollution Index, and 30<sup>th</sup> on the Solid Waste Index (Zhu et al., 2016). As early as 2007, Shenzhen established its EPPE system to address these problems, and has continuously revised and improved the institutional design over the past decade. This makes it an outstanding but also representative case to understand the making and implementation of local environmental policy in China.

In a previous study, some of the authors in this paper assessed the administrative practice and effectiveness of Shenzhen's EPPE and found several shortcomings (Liu et al., 2016b). For example,

many of the indicators are overly subjective; and although they require further devising, in the process of establishing scores, there is no real dialogue among responsible parties about what constitutes good evaluation, good information, good weighting and appropriate interpretation (Liu et al., 2016b). In several cases, they also found a mismatch between the duties imposed on public authorities and the power instruments actually at their disposal to remedy pollution problems (Liu et al., 2016b). Haggling over data and information among various departments also hinders effective cooperation in the administration of the system (Liu et al., 2016b). Meanwhile, data show that Shenzhen's environmental quality has only improved slightly with the implementation of the EPPE system, despite large amounts of money being invested (Liu et al., 2016b). All these problems argue for the necessity of analyzing how this insufficiently effective – or at least unsatisfactory – policy came into being, and what can be done to improve it.

In this article, we analyze the evolution of the Shenzhen EPPE and interpret its policy dynamics with the aim of producing a more general understanding of local environmental policy making and public sector performance management in China – i.e., what are the drivers and logic of local environmental policy making?

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. Part 2 reviews relevant literature on this topic. Part 3 proposes an analytical framework based on the “Problem-Politics-Policy” streams of the multiple streams approach (MSA) developed by Kingdon (1984). Part 4 introduces the Shenzhen EPPE system and its changes from 2007 to 2015. Part 5 analyzes the underlying factors of the above-mentioned policy dynamics. Part 6 makes concluding remarks and puts forward policy suggestions.

## 2. Literature review

Performance evaluation has a long history in governance. The earliest relevant record dates to the 1800s, when Scottish cotton mill workers were rated on performance at the end of each working day (DeVries et al., 1981). More relevantly, the introduction of new public management principles in the 1980s promoted the use of sophisticated performance evaluation methods for employees in the public sector, particularly in the United States (Eccles, 1991; Hood, 1995). Through strategic use of performance information,

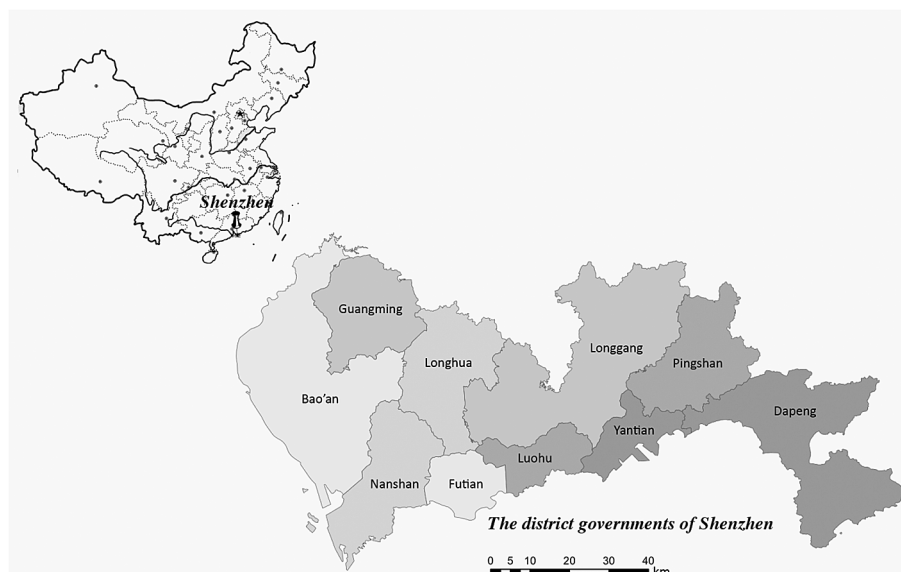


Fig. 1. The location of Shenzhen in China and its municipal administrative divisions.

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