



How authoritarian is the environmental governance of China?



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ABSTRACT

This paper challenges the prevailing perception that the environmental governance of China is a case exemplar of authoritarian environmentalism. Using low-carbon governance as an example, it shows that although China's national low-carbon policy appears highly authoritarian, the situation on the ground is much more ambiguous, displaying a mixture of authoritarian and liberal features. While China's top-down and non-participatory policy environment has been crucial in stimulating a low-carbon transition, the failure of the central government to control local actors has created a situation of de facto neoliberal environmentalism, where local governments and energy-intensive enterprises enjoy a high degree of freedom and flexibility to manage their own energy consumption in spite of the overt authoritarian rule. The findings of this research show that viewing China's environmental governance as a clear-cut instance of authoritarian environmentalism should be done with circumspection, and that studying the nature of environmental governance as a complex process requires a thorough understanding of not just national policy but also local politics and the ways the two are connected.

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1. Introduction

Authoritarian environmentalism as a discourse of environmental governance can be defined by two aspects (Beeson, 2010). The first aspect is a policy process dominated by an autonomous state. In other words, the policy process is non-participatory, characterised by the absence of public consultation, grassroots activism, civil litigation, and lobbying. The second aspect is the pursuing of environmental outcomes by restricting individual liberty, and is therefore tantamount to the preference for a command-and-control, regulation-based policy environment. Authoritarian environmentalism is often contrasted with free market/neoliberal environmentalism, which accentuates individual freedom, and with democratic/participatory environmentalism, which stresses public participation in the policy process (Andrew and Cortese, 2013; Gilley, 2012). There exists an ongoing debate over the pros and cons of authoritarian environmentalism as a solution to pressing environmental problems such as anthropocentric climate change. Proponents praise the efficiency and effectiveness of the model to address ecological crises (Gilley, 2012; Ophuls, 1977; Shearman and Smith, 2007). Opponents, on the other hand, argue that the concentration of power and the lack of accountability could eventually harm the environment because the system allows

the elite to benefit personally from ecological degradation (Dryzek, 1987; Winslow, 2005). This paper moves beyond this normative debate to focus on the nature and workings of authoritarian environmentalism. It seeks to answer a seemingly simple question: How authoritarian is the environmental governance of China?

Pure authoritarian environmentalism obviously does not exist in the ideal form in any context; just as pure neoliberal or democratic environmentalism does not exist. In practice, a mixture of different environmental governance models can be found in every country (Gilley, 2012). Nevertheless, existing studies typically treat the environmental governance of China as a case exemplar of authoritarian environmentalism (Beeson, 2010; Eaton and Kostka, 2014; Gilley, 2012; Schreurs, 2011; Zhang et al., 2013; Zhu et al., 2015). As pointed out by many scholars, China's environmental governance can be characterised by a powerful party-state that dominates a mono-centric and non-participatory policy process, a weak and shackled environmental civil society, and a regulatory regime based mainly on command-and-control instruments (Deng, 2010; Liu et al., 2012; Kostka and Mol, 2013; Schwartz, 2004). This paper, however, challenges such conventional wisdom in the light of new empirical evidence. It argues that simply regarding the environmental governance of China as authoritarian disregards some important features of the governance and politics of the country. More specifically, the decentralisation of policymaking and policy implementation in the reform era has created political space for local governments to act as

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representatives of local interests, rather than as mere agents of the central government (Chung, 2000; Li, 2010; Lieberthal, 1992). It is now quite common for local governments to distort, ignore, or even challenge central government initiatives for the sake of local interests. The fragmentation of authoritarian power is particularly prevalent in environmental governance, as conflicting political and financial incentives reward policy misimplementation (Marks, 2010; Ran, 2013). Therefore, the nature of environmental governance in China depends on not only national policy but also central-local relations and local politics.

This paper uses China's emerging low-carbon governance as an illustrative example. China is experiencing a rapid rise in energy consumption and carbon emissions because of economic growth, industrialisation, and urbanisation (Feng et al., 2012; Lo and Wang, 2013; Minx et al., 2011). Coping with the associated economic and environmental problems has become a top priority for the government. In November 2005, in a highly unusual move, the Politburo (the highest decision-making body of the Communist Party of China) announced the national goal of reducing energy intensity by 20% in five years. The State Council designated the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) as the responsible body to oversee the energy conservation and climate protection objectives. Since 2006, the central government has issued many low-carbon policies and programmes relating to various aspects of energy conservation and renewable energy development (Lo, 2014).

In addition to the negative environmental effects of climate change and the ever-increasing international pressure on China to take mitigation action, China's recent endeavours in respect of low-carbon governance are also tied to two national political-economic concerns. The first concern is rapidly declining energy security (Yao and Chang, 2014). From 2001 to 2005, energy consumption in China skyrocketed from 1504 to 2360 million tonnes of standard coal equivalents. The dramatic rise in energy demand disrupted long-term energy planning, resulting in massive blackouts in more than two-thirds of the country's provinces. Thousands of factories were brought to a standstill, causing economic losses of over 1 trillion RMB (Bo, 2006). China is now a major importer of coal, oil, and natural gas; therefore, securing sufficient and stable supplies of energy resources at reasonable prices has become a key economic priority (Odgaard and Delman, 2014). Energy conservation and the deployment of renewable energy technologies are considered important contributors to China's energy security and the effort to reduce the reliance on energy imports.

The second concern, which is discussed less often in the literature, is the desire to optimise the structure of the economy (Liang et al., 2013). The Chinese government views the current resource- and labour-intensive, low-value-added, export-oriented economic structure as a significant threat to sustainable growth. A low-carbon industrial revolution is therefore essential to propelling China into a new round of sustainable economic prosperity. Consequently, the national focus is placed on developing globally competitive green technologies with domestic intellectual property. Examples of these technologies are wind turbines, photovoltaic cells, solar water heaters, and electric vehicles (de la Tour et al., 2011; Liu and Kokko, 2013; Wang et al., 2012).

Because of these interrelated eco-economic drivers, low-carbon governance has become a national priority and one of the most important components of China's environmental governance. The next section introduces China's authoritarian low-carbon governance as recorded in policy documents. The subsequent section presents a case study that explores the functioning of China's low-carbon governance. Next, the causes of this discrepancy are discussed, focusing on the failure of the central government to control local authorities with respect to low-carbon governance. The paper concludes by considering the

implications of the findings for the future of environmental governance in China.

2. China's low-carbon governance

In China, the discourse of authoritarian environmentalism is institutionalised by concrete command-and-control relations between state and market and between central and local governments. Therefore, understanding these command-and-control relations is key to this discussion. Within the context of low-carbon governance, command-and-control relations are mainly operationalised by two very important national-level programmes. The first is the Ten-Thousand Enterprises Energy Conservation Low-Carbon Programme (henceforth Ten-Thousand Enterprises Programme) which governs state-market relations in energy conservation and climate protection. The programme was jointly established in 2011 by the NDRC as a successor to the Thousand Enterprises Energy Conservation Programme that was active from 2006 to 2010. The programme regulates energy-intensive enterprises that annually consume 10,000 tonnes of coal equivalent, or more. Using this benchmark, the programme includes 16,018 enterprises that collectively account for approximately 60% of the total energy consumption of China. The programme is expected to deliver 250 million tonnes of coal equivalent of energy saving over five years. To put this figure in perspective, the total energy saving target set in the 12th Five-Year Plan is 670 million tonnes of coal equivalent. In other words, the Ten-Thousand Enterprises Programme will deliver over one-third of China's energy savings in the 12th Five-Year Plan.

The Ten-Thousand Enterprises Programme works by assigning energy-saving targets to regulated enterprises. In addition, the enterprises are required to fulfil five types of energy management requirements. First, they should establish leadership for energy conservation. Second, they should provide incentives to employees to encourage energy conservation behaviours. The third requirement is to set up a sophisticated energy management system (EMS) that includes energy audit, collecting energy statistics, formulating energy conservation plans, and energy conservation education. The fourth requirement is to invest in the research and development of energy-efficient technologies. The final requirement is to obey the relevant energy laws and regulations. Table 1 shows the 100-point evaluation system of the Ten-Thousand Enterprises Programme. Note that achieving energy-saving targets is a veto criterion, meaning that the targets must be met for the enterprise to pass the evaluation. Evaluation would also fail if the enterprise scored fewer than 60 points.

An interesting feature of this programme, from a governance perspective, is that the central government distinguishes between two groups of enterprises. The first group are state-owned enterprises (SOEs) owned by the central government. Although relatively small in number, these enterprises are the largest and most energy-intensive in China. Notwithstanding the reforms that have modernised the state-owned sector, the central SOEs resemble a central government ministry because of the strong political supervision and their leadership often being directly appointed by the central government. The central SOEs participating in the Ten-Thousand Enterprises Programme are directly controlled by the central government through the State-Owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC). The second group are SOEs owned by local governments and private enterprises. Compared with the central SOEs, these local enterprises are smaller and less energy intensive, but far more numerous and heterogeneous. Given the large number of local enterprises and their geographic dispersion, it is difficult for the central government to exercise direct control over them.

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