



Research article

Environmental governance in China: Interactions between the state and “nonstate actors”[☆]

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ABSTRACT

In the West, limited government capacity to solve environmental problems has triggered the rise of a variety of “nonstate actors” to supplement government efforts or provide alternative mechanisms for addressing environmental issues. How does this development - along with our efforts to understand it - map onto environmental governance processes in China? China's efforts to address environmental issues reflect institutionalized governance processes that differ from parallel western processes in ways that have major consequences for domestic environmental governance practices and the governance of China “going abroad.” China's governance processes blur the distinction between the state and other actors; the “shadow of the state” is a major factor in all efforts to address environmental issues. The space occupied by nonstate actors in western systems is occupied by *shiye danwei* (“public service units”), *she hui tuanti* (“social associations”) and e-platforms, all of which have close links to the state. Meanwhile, international NGOs and multinational corporations are also significant players in China. As a result, the mechanisms of influence that produce effects in China differ in important ways from mechanisms familiar from the western experience. This conclusion has far-reaching implications for those seeking to address global environmental concerns, given the importance of China's growing economy and burgeoning network of trade relationships.

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[☆] This article stems from workshop discussion among university-based scholars and nonstate actor practitioners. Co-authors include individuals affiliated with some organizations discussed in the text. The university-based lead authors (Guttman, Young, Jing) are not affiliated with nonstate actors discussed in the article.

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1. Introduction

In the west, limited government capacity to make and enforce environmental standards has led to increased efforts of “nonstate

actors” to supplement or provide alternatives to governmental actions to address environmental problems. Such actors include both environmental nongovernmental or nonprofit organizations (ENGOs) and for-profit corporations that, individually or in association, take an interest in the systematic modification of enterprise behavior to embrace sustainability. In many cases, the focus is on global supply chains, and nonstate actors include groups that reach across state borders.

In this article, we ask how developing western literature on nonstate actors in environmental governance applies to the China experience. Are key findings and frameworks generalizable from western systems to the setting evolving in China during the four decades since People's Republic of China (PRC) reform and opening up began? Do we need to make significant adjustments to explain China developments? Equally important, will lessons from the Chinese experience broaden and deepen understanding of the roles nonstate actors play in environmental protection? We aim both to advance understanding of environmental governance and to contribute to the thinking of those engaged in applied efforts to address environmental problems (Young et al., 2015).¹

There is growing literature on domestic and cross-border activities of nonstate actors addressing environmental issues in western democracies and many developing countries (Bartley et al., 2015; Auld, 2014; Buthe and Mattli, 2011; Cashore et al., 2004). This literature encompasses two broad streams, one dealing with the role of ENGOs and business associations in creating and implementing standards, certification schemes, and codes of conduct, and the other dealing with the role of corporations and focusing on what is often called corporate social responsibility or CSR (Baron, 2009; Vogel, 2006). However, there is little literature on whether and how global nonstate actor networks operate in or with China or on the landscape of a China native counterpart community.

For the most part, western literature does not deal with the experience of China, despite the fact that China accounts for ~18% of the Earth's human population, has the world's second largest economy, and is central to a burgeoning network of global trade relationships. Equally important, China has a distinctive system of governance with central planning remaining a key mechanism for setting priorities and allocating society's resources.

Our central argument is that the current western vernacular is not robust enough to capture the realities of what is happening in China, where government is the central player in all realms and western distinctions among public sector, private sector, and civil society are not clearly applicable. China has its own institutionalized governance processes (Young et al., 2015). Dealing with environmental protection in this setting involves a set of practices that cannot be understood through a lens that features a sharp distinction between the state and nonstate actors. Any effort to shed light on roles that various types of actors play in addressing issues of environmental protection in China must take differences between Chinese institutionalized governance processes and familiar western processes as a point of departure.

We hope our work contributes to the development of an improved vocabulary for comparative analysis.² For the moment, however, we retain the term nonstate actor because alternatives like NGO or CSO (civil society organization) and more culturally specific terms like Quango do not encompass core actors in our

story, particularly “private” profitmaking enterprises and other actors (notably *shiye danwei*) that have received little attention in the west and may have no western analogs.

The line separating “state” and “nonstate” is both blurry and subject to change, with variations from society to society. To a Chinese audience, for example, “nonstate” may seem hard to apply to a U.S., Brazilian, Canadian or European “NGO” that relies heavily on government funds. Similarly, a Chinese analyst might question whether a company like Lockheed Martin that relies almost entirely on government contracts is a private enterprise (Guttman, 2000). Although we use the English term nonstate actor in this article, we emphasize that western usage does not map onto the Chinese experience precisely.

We proceed in several steps. Following an initial account of important differences between western systems and contemporary China realities, we ask what Chinese actors are important to our story (Guttman, 2015)?

Having identified the relevant actors, we examine their main streams of activities, with agendas emanating from the state, from organizations independent of enterprises, and from enterprises themselves, either individually or through associations. This sets the stage for an analysis of principal mechanisms used to influence the behavior of major players. An initial exploration of the effectiveness of nonstate actor efforts to influence environmental governance in China together with a preliminary account of key determinants of success follows.

The final section assesses insights from the Chinese experience that may enrich analysis of nonstate actor roles in environmental governance in other systems. We include reflections on next steps in analysis of the role of nonstate actors in environmental governance.

2. Setting the stage: the landscape of environmental governance in China

We begin with a brief characterization of China's environmental governance landscape. Though China's remarkable economic development features private enterprises and markets, China, in Constitutional terms is a “socialist” system, and one in which the Communist Party of China (CPC) is key in directing the economy and related environmental policies. Despite marketizing trends, state planning - from the central Five Year Plan (FYP) to myriad further central and local plans - continues to set core goals for society and resource allocation. The concept of ecological civilization (*shengtai wenming*), introduced at the 2007 17th Party Congress, is accompanied by the greening of the Five Year Plan (Koleski, 2017; Young et al., 2015; Li, nd.; 13th Five Year Plan for Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China, 2016).

Pollution, treated as an “externality” in western analyses of environmental governance, is internalized in China's planning process. Core enterprises, including energy companies that are key sources of pollution, are state-owned enterprises or SOEs (*guoyou qiye*). The government also owns much land and resources at issue in sustainability.

China's governments have been civilizational leaders in standard setting. Despite its short reign, the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE) is considered seminal in part because of its standardization of weights, measures, coins, written script language, and administrative structures (Lewis, 2007). Government agencies for standard setting and supervision emerged as enterprises and markets developed during the “opening up and reform period.” These included, at the ministerial level, the General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection & Quarantine (AQSIQ) and, under AQSIQ, the Standards Administration of the People's Republic of China (SAC) and the Certification and Accreditation Administration

¹ This article reflects discussion during a two day 2016 workshop at Fudan University that brought together representatives of nonstate actors and environmental studies, law, public policy/public management scholars from China, US, EU, Brazil, and Australia.

² While the term nonstate actor is standard in international relations discourse, many practitioners and scholars also use it in relation to domestic governance (e.g., WHO, 2006; Canuto, 2012; Steer et al., 2015).

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