

The Mystery of China's Glorious Green Dreams

In a decentralized system, managing pollution has become less important than managing blame.

The world's ability to limit atmospheric warming from greenhouse gases depends very much on China's will and ability to control the carbon emitted by its growing economy. Currently the country is responsible for about 27% of global carbon emissions—more than anywhere else—and it will likely drive half of the growth in the world's carbon emissions between now and 2030. And carbon-driven warming isn't China's only environmental problem. Air pollution alone kills more than 1.5 million people every year.

Since 2012, China's leadership has often spoken of a "China Dream" that connects domestic environmental actions to global leadership on climate change and national revival. President Xi Jinping has repeatedly stressed that China's effort to address climate change is not because others have asked for it, but is instead self-motivated. Xi often speaks of green policies in glowing terms, such as, "moving toward a new era of ecological civilization and the construction of a beautiful China are the most important elements to realizing the China Dream of a glorious revival of the Chinese nation."

Leaders in China's central government show a great awareness of climate change issues and have devoted significant resources to comprehensive climate policies and environmental laws, while trying to lead the creation of a global climate change regime. The government's 13th Five Year Plan,

covering 2016-2020, built on previous plans to set stricter environmental and energy targets. However, it's becoming increasingly clear that many of these climate change policies have produced little effect, and some showcase projects appear to have failed, including the low-carbon-city pilot project and northern China's rural coal-to-gas heating projects—both of which have become very controversial.

Within China, the gap between lofty green political rhetoric and reality is often explained by a phrase from the Yuan dynasty: "Heaven is high and the emperor is far away." This analysis sees the major obstacle to China's climate governance as local governments and officials who turn blind eyes to polluters in their jurisdictions, ignoring policies from higher up.

From this point of view, the reason Beijing's climate change policies are ineffective is because local officials oppose the central government's policies or refuse to implement them properly. But this is simplistic and illogical, in my opinion. Furthermore, understanding and addressing the true roots of the problem could provide a pathway to bringing implementation closer to the promise of greening China's dream.

In fact, between Beijing's soaring climate change agenda and its lackluster implication lies a political paradox, and understanding it requires delving into the institutional constraints embedded in China's climate and environmental politics at the local and national level. To start, it is useful to

explore two such institutional constraints—political incentive and blame management—and the ways they defy expectations. Examining the nuances of these constraints will both explain why China's environmental ambitions have failed to trickle down to local levels, and why local officials seem to be competent at carrying through on other policies but not the green ones.

Most of the officials who implement national policies at the local level are party members, known as cadres, who can be considered both rational and ambitious. One of their major goals is to maximize their own political and administrative power, seeking promotion to higher positions as quickly as possible. In a democratic system, ambitious officials do this by courting voters, who continue to elect them to higher offices. In China's system, where local cadres are competitively selected and appointed by the Communist Party, job promotion could be an effective political incentive to motivate local government officials to fully implement environmental policies.

But a closer look at the promotion system reveals why this does not occur. The major institutional mechanism for rewarding local officials is the Cadre Performance Evaluation System (CPES), administered and run by the central government. The CPES conveys information about which national policies should receive priority—detailing which are quantifiable “hard targets.” Successfully implementing a hard target is likely to help advance an official's career, whereas failure to meet the targets could effectively end an official's career. Accordingly, local officials value positive CPES evaluations, and so they are more likely to implement clear and quantifiable hard targets rather than vague “soft targets.”

One reason why local government officials haven't readily adopted climate change and environmental goals is that they became hard targets regulated by the CPES only in 2011. China's 12th Five Year Plan, released in March 2011, addressed growing environmental and energy concerns by setting binding targets in seven major areas: energy intensity, carbon intensity, percentage of renewable fuels used in the primary energy mix, emissions of major pollutants such as sulfur dioxide, forest coverage, amount of water consumed per unit of value-added industrial output, and farmland reserves. This plan was widely perceived as an ambitious blueprint for a Chinese green revolution.

One might assume that making environmental and energy goals into hard targets would encourage cadres to implement them. However, in practice, the process by which targets are set and evaluated is

imprecise and often creates internal competition and conflict with other hard targets. Generally speaking, local government officials are under the impression that meeting environmental and energy targets is likely to conflict with fulfilling other hard targets regulated by the CPES, which include increasing local revenue growth; hitting goals for production of goods and services; and even restricting the number of public protests, called “mass incidents.” Though they are supposed to meet all these targets, local governments actually prioritize among competing and conflicting mandates. This is especially true because meeting environmental targets is time consuming and often requires longer term investments than other nonenvironmental ones.

When it's impossible to meet a target through investment and hard work, local governments feel compelled to meet the target by other means—often statistical data manipulation. Such fudging has a long

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history in China, perhaps reaching its peak during the Great Leap Forward in 1950s, when local governments gave glowing accounts of productivity as the country slipped into famine. If local cadres are faced with too many hard targets that they cannot meet, they may manipulate the statistical data by overreporting achievements, underreporting failures, or using different statistical methods. As a local environmental official I interviewed put it: “Meeting targets is like playing a numbers game. It's impossible to meet all the binding targets, but still we have to meet those targets by whatever measures—which means we have to produce fake data.” Another explained: “It won't be very hard to meet those targets once you know how to play the numbers game with the central government.” The temptation for cadres to fake data is also magnified by the fact that the central government has no effective institutional mechanism for double-checking the data.

Before concluding that cheating local officials are to blame for China's shaky environmental progress, it is necessary to ask whether the central government

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is aware of widespread manipulation of the data. But a review of public official documents of the central government makes it clear that policy-makers in Beijing are familiar with the problem. Therefore, the larger issue is that the behavior of local governments is legitimized by a system where they can choose whichever method of measurement will best help them meet the requirements of hard environmental and energy targets.

From this perspective, the central government, rather than local governments, has greater responsibility for the disconnect between climate change rhetoric and reality. Yet local governments—against all logic—are still frequently blamed for failing to implement climate policy while central government officials are praised for being ambitious but naïve. Under the current system, central government officials cannot be seen as “morally innocent.” Hence, the puzzle still remains: why do political incentives remain weak despite central government leaders’ seemingly strong will to fight global warming?

To better understand this puzzle, it is important to highlight the nature of China’s decentralized climate governance system and its implications for the politics of blame. Although the country’s political system as a whole is authoritarian, its climate and environmental regime is regarded as one of the most decentralized systems in the world. One example of this can be seen in the disjointed structure of the more than 20 ministries (agencies) of the State Council that are members in the National Coordination Committee on Climate Change, including the National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Ecology and Environment, among others. Research has shown that one outcome of this fragmented authoritarianism is that climate and environmental policies of the various agencies often conflict with one another.

Although one might assume that policy-makers select decentralized governing systems because

they believe that will create better environmental performance, in reality, China’s policy-makers may have chosen this fragmented system because it obscures who gets blamed when climate policies fail and who receives credit when they succeed. Despite not being very effective at cleaning up pollution, this decentralized system of climate and environmental governance may prevent the central government from being blamed for policy failures, therefore reducing the risk that the legitimacy of the central government will be questioned. A similar displacement of blame occurs in other segments of governance, including the recent response to the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan.

One of the tenets of environmental politics theory is that environmental responsibility ideally should be assigned to the levels of government that are perceived as the most effective and trustworthy. However, China’s decentralized regime occurs within a political context where local governments are generally seen as less legitimate than the central government. Researchers have noted that, generally, the lower the level of a particular government, the less political trust there is, and this is particularly true when it comes to China’s climate and environmental politics. Both poll results and my own fieldwork show that people generally trust the central government’s will to fight pollution and global warming, but they are dissatisfied with the efficacy of local government. This is the inverse of the United States, where people generally distrust the federal government and have faith in local institutions—particularly around environmental issues.

In theory, authoritarian regimes lose legitimacy when environmental protests occur. In the formerly Communist Eastern European countries of Ukraine, Poland, and Czechoslovakia, environmental crises led to national social movements that presented significant challenges to their governments’ political legitimacy. In China, however, almost all environmental protests have happened at local levels—where local governments and officials were targeted and blamed.

But protests at the local level do not necessarily mean that people genuinely have more trust in the central government. Rather, local residents realize that protesting their local government bears a relatively lower political risk than blaming the central government. As one researcher noted, “Beijing is pursuing a deliberate and largely successful strategy of protecting the central government from environmental fallout by skillfully deflecting blame toward protectionist local officials and state-owned enterprises. In the process, the central government is enhancing its own power.”

Thus, the hierarchical power structure among various climate and environmental policy-makers allows central

Party leaders to present their “green” credentials and ideology to the general public and international community, without taking responsibility for failures. Today’s climate and environmental policy discourse is dominated by a Party statement known as “Xi Jinping’s Thought on Ecological Civilization.” And when the party’s legitimacy is seriously challenged by environmental issues, leadership is quick to demonstrate concern. In February 2014, when northern China suffered from toxic levels of air pollution, Xi Jinping made an unannounced visit to a historic neighborhood in Beijing. “Breathing together, sharing the fate,” was the revolutionary slogan selected by the Xinhua News Agency as the headline to promote Xi’s impromptu public appearances. This headline was then widely tweeted by netizens who hailed Xi for his “brave act of not wearing a facemask and breathing bad air with the masses.” “Right on, Big Xi didn’t wear a facemask!” wrote one microblogger.

A similarly constructed political discourse is used to describe Xi’s leadership on global climate change.

portrayed EPBs in a negative light. As people’s dissatisfaction with environmental problems has grown progressively worse, local EPB leaders have been portrayed in an increasingly negative way, and corruption cases involving EPB officials are widely reported. These reports serve to suggest that the central government is resolved to fight both corruption and pollution. Under such circumstances, the possibility of local EPB officials avoiding blame grows ever slimmer, while the chances of actually enacting serious antipollution policies also diminish.

Unless China’s central government takes significant measures to address the system of perverse incentives embedded in the overall structure of its environmental governing system, the policy implementation gap will not be overcome by efforts at the local level. As long as the central government can be protected from being blamed for policy failures, it will lack sufficient incentive to address those institutional constraints. But this cannot last forever. Though environmental deterioration has not yet affected the legitimacy of the Communist

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Official state media have reported that Xi believed that “addressing climate change is necessary for China’s sustainable development and is our way of assuming responsibility in the construction of Community of Common Destiny.” Another report asserted that “China has always attached great importance to addressing climate change.”

So here, then, is where political incentives and blame management overlap to create stasis in China’s environmental agenda: if the Party’s top leadership can dominate the discourse of green policy, while avoiding blame for policy failure at local levels, then neither the national leadership nor local governments have an incentive to actually enact the environmental changes that China needs. This can be seen most clearly in the treatment of the local environmental protection bureaus (EPBs). The weak position of EPBs in local power structures often means that other agencies assign them the most onerous parts of environmental policy implementation. Because they have limited authority and resources, the local EPBs and their officials fail and then become targets for blame.

In recent years, Chinese media have consistently

Party’s leadership, the writing is on the wall. In the long term, the costs of environmental pollution will fundamentally challenge the country’s economic growth and social stability, which the central government believes to be the source of its legitimacy.

China’s political leadership is no doubt aware of this fragility, and also aware of how illogical it is to keep maintaining its moral innocence as local officials fail to make real progress on pollution. But in order to really change the political incentives in place now, China needs systematic political reform that holds local officials accountable to local citizen’s demands for environmental as well as climate change action. Whereas officials involved in environmental and climate governance are now evaluated by the government from the top, local officials’ performance on those matters should be primarily assessed by local citizen’s needs and awareness from the bottom up.

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