Environmentalism without Democracy? Green Urbanization in China

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Abstract

The rise of Western environmentalism has been accompanied by the growth of the anti-nuclear movement, the growth of the anti-war movement, and other emancipatory actions closely related to the binary oppositional practice of state-social conflict in the post-industrial context. In the established political discourse and practice, the positive causal link between participation and effective environmental governance has long been regarded as a normative guideline to reach a more just and sustainable society. However, recent discussions about theories of authoritarian environmentalism have challenged its basic assumptions, and commentators have begun to focus on concerns about potential chaos and security threats that may arise from urgent environmental setbacks. Researchers have increasingly used China as a case study to explore the possibility of a non-participatory model of environmental policy-making. That being said, these discussions still lack a sufficient account of concrete policy areas. Our article will explore a particular topic—green urbanization, which has been deemed a top priority by policy elites—to understand changing patterns of environmental authoritarianism as a perceived alternative path to preempting environmentally induced conflicts. To make our argument, we compare the institutional changes between the fourth and fifth generation of Chinese leaders, mapping the changing paradigm of authoritarian environmentalism with particular emphases on ‘defragmented instruments’ that seek to remodel the symbolic uses of sustainable development and reconcile the dichotomy between economy and ecology in its own context.

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1. Introduction

Non-democratic approach of environmentalism, or authoritarian environmentalism, as an alternative environmental policy model, has again drawing attention of an increasing number of scholars in recent years due to China’s emerging presence in global climate politics, although those debates contained more prudent apprehension than optimism. Nevertheless, it seems undeniable that the new theory of authoritarian environmentalism revived the old, unresolved academic debate begun in the late 1970s, in which commentators were debating about which model—market liberalism or authoritarian communism—provides better environmental performance in an empirical world? Such discussion seems to re-emerge due to the long and stalled progress of industrialized states’ leading global climate policy as well as China’s growing influence in global climate politics. The academic debate means to discuss an non-conflictual mode of public policy to mitigate the effect of climate change, which does not emphasize emancipatory, decentralized environmentalism (Blühdorn 2013b: 23), but demands the opposite solution—environmental governance urging contemporary ecological degradation by using a non-participatory framework of a method to solve environmental problems by mobilizing the public from the top down. However, most of these new discussions have been seeking to illustrate a possibility of a particular mode of governing system distinct from participatory environment model by considering China as a fixed, single entity, but neglect to extend this theoretical model to a broader empirical realm time frame to understand the changing nature of environmental policy model(s) within the authoritarian regime. More specifically, the debates have not shown the differences of institutional changes within the party state to further equip the explaining power of the theoretical framework, nor have them probed possible evolution or typologies of relevant policy models within it. In short, so far, in these discussions of empirical authoritarian

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environmentalism, the commentators have still been hovering in the eyes of the paradox of democracy and authoritarianism; there has not yet appeared in the literature a study dealing with comparative environmental authoritarianism to examine how the implementation of environmental policies have been changed in response to the urgent environmental degradations. To fill the gap of knowledge, this paper aims to understand the changing patterns of institutional under different leadership; we use case method to compare new policy formulation and practices of green urbanization in China\(^3\) and to explore the institutional and ideational changes between the fourth and the fifth generation of the leaders to further understand and extrapolate changing patterns of environmental authoritarianism as a perceived alternative path to preempt environmental disasters, to enrich our cognitive understanding of this theory.

Our research questions are as follows:

1. How have the new policy elites in China introduced implementation mechanisms regarding green urbanization through a variety of institutional instruments?
2. What differences of thinking behind the aforementioned institutions have echoes in the process of implementing green urbanization?

We will analyze this article with a qualitative interpretive strategy. In the second section, we re-examine the debate of decentralized and non-democratic approach of environmental policy model emerged in the recent literature. In section 3, we further discuss green urbanization in China, examining how recent top-down approach to it have been conducted, and understanding how and what differences of thinking regarding sustainability and equality vis-a-vis the implementation of green urbanization have been shaped under two generations of leadership. In so doing, we seek to identify the challenges, the origins of thoughts, and the policy shifts that related to green urbanization, to understand how the new leadership has adopted and

\(^3\) We focus on the comparison of the institutional crafts related to green urbanization introduced by new leadership in China, namely Xi-Li administration between 2013 and 2014.
integrated the new implementation mechanisms into established policy areas. Using a non-stable perspective, we examine how the policy elites in a non-democratic state, China, have conducted the policy experiment of green urbanization and have dealt with its existed (if not exceptional) dilemma of decentralization and the related implementation deficits (Gilley 2012). In section 4, we synthesize the above findings, and thus argue that the changing governing strategies of green urbanization are indicative of a transitional paradigm of authoritarian environmentalism that deployed more “defragmented instruments” by the current generation of leaders in China.\(^4\)

The morphology of this mode of authoritarian environmentalism has not only showed the divergence of the global consensus mode of environmental governance, but has also indicated a new mode of policy decision making process different from what has long been depicted as negotiation-oriented policy making style by a number of China watchers such as Lampton (1992).

2.1. Democracy, Participation and Environment

There have long been narratives dealing with the importance of participation in eco-politic. From politicians and radical environmentalists to business practitioners, actors at different levels seem to have an inkling of the positive link between participation and environmental protection. However, the notions of participation have been intertwined with environmental politics throughout its brief history. From the beginning of the emergence of eco-politics to the moment after the Brundtland Report was presented, the conviction and the concepts involving participation have changed over time (Blühdorn 2011; 2014). These changes have been shaped and recognized by a number of scholars working with the changing perceptions of environmental crisis. Firstly, from the late 1960s to the mid-1980s, environmentalism spread along with new social movements originating in Western Europe. The actors’ role involved in this movement is no longer constrained by its

\(^4\) The term “defragmented instruments” hereof is defined as the coercive measures of policy implementation that, instead of bargaining politics between different levels of actors, rely more on intimidation-driven measures to provide policy outcomes under administrative hierarchy.
geographical, organizational characteristics, union links, or even missions (Bäckstrand and Lövbrand 2006). Actors seek a more radical way of taking decentralized action and defending civil society (Bäckstrand and Lövbrand 2006), and they have fundamentally challenged the capitalist materialism of the established economic system, advocating and seeking a new way of life (Scott 1990). Such a social movement based on emancipation has occurred against the backdrop of the anti-nuclear movement. This deployed non-traditional ways to achieve public and political attention for the movement, so that environmental issues emerged on the Western world's political map (Price et al. 2014). Such a movement, rooted in the tradition of emancipation, is linked to acts against hierarchical bureaucracy (Dobson 2007). That is, liberation of the environment and citizens’ autonomy are seen as linked concepts, or as having a close, positive relationship.

However, since the 1980s onwards, sustainability has gradually become the dominant framework for the discussion of international environmental politics (Hajer 2010). With an international conference - the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE) - organized by the United Nations, this concept became the focus of world attention in 1972. The concept joined environmental protection and social/economic development together for the first time, pointing to the principle of a balanced development reconciling poverty alleviation and avoiding ecological deterioration. At that meeting, the different priorities concerning environmental degradation and economic development between the countries of the North and South first emerged (Whitehead 2014). On the one hand, Western environmentalists believed that the existing economic model had been, and would be, facing temporal and special limitations because of the planet’s non-recovering environmental carrying capacity. According to this view, people had ignored intergenerational equity, and irresponsibly had damaged the environment with the unlimited exploitation of natural resources (Carter 2012). Commentators from the global South, on the other hand, contended that this account could not be transferred to the majority of developing states, since, for these often economically backward countries, development was necessary for survival (Najam 2005). It is in the context
of these conflicts that the Brundtland Report raised an appealing new paradigm, seeking to bridge the two contradictory imperatives (Najam 2005). As Baker (2005) indicates, this paradigm “seeks to reconcile the ecological, social and economic dimensions of development, now and into the future, and adopts a global perspective in this task.” The new framework taking into account the need for development was subsequently presented in *Our Common Future*, the so-called Brundtland Report, by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) in 1987. Development as one of the key concepts of sustainability became a conceptual watershed in ecological politics (Najam 2005; Carter 2012). With the Rio Declaration of 1992 and the Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development of 2002, the notion of sustainable development – “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (WECD 1987: 43) was established as the mainstream objective across the globe, becoming a term familiar to academics and policy makers, despite its broad (or even vague) definition (Blühdorn 2007; 2013b), which still relies on political actors and academic researchers to provide a more detailed explanation.

The above-mentioned decisive watershed created a different aspiration in one of the sub-principles of sustainability - participation - from the political ecology of the past. On the one hand, sustainable development, as a broad conceptual framework, attempts to decouple the environmental and economic dichotomies (Baker 2005). In the Brundtland Report, the authors claim that, to achieve sustainable development goals, those in power must not only encourage stakeholder participation in decision making, but also set the norms of good environmental governance as a platform for interaction between state and market-state actors (Baker 2014: 103). Business actors, as stakeholders, have since then become new important players in the world of sustainability, and have been incorporated into the new framework to participate in it. Public-private partnership, as a more effective environmental governance strategy, has been considered a politically correct model for OECD countries (Mol 2007: 219). The new market-oriented policy instruments are increasingly being introduced in industrialized countries. This becomes a de-politicized, reliance-on-experts policy
nstruments (Bäckstrand 2004: 696), with which it is hoped to import technology-oriented environmental management systems and to invite business stakeholders to link environmental externalities to economic activities in highly industrialized countries (Huber 2000). Such a depoliticized policy model that includes stakeholder participation in actual policy operations has been excluding the radical participation practices that have attempted to solve environmental degradation issues (Blühdorn 2000a; 2000b). Again, democracy is attached to the conceptual instrument considered as the key solution to cope with the above-mentioned ethical environmental issues. It is reiterated in the Brundtland Report, becoming one of the significant elements of environmental governance templates, despite the fact that the initial appeal for radical civic participation models has been abandoned, or replaced by stakeholder participation (Blühdorn 2013a). In a more novel concept of sustainability in practice - from deliberative practice to contractual cooperation between the public and private sectors – the model of environmental governance suggests that the sharing of knowledge, financial responsibility and risk, and a commitment to transparency in decision-making, could enhance the accountability of policy outcomes (Joss 2010). This is by no means a current belief entrenched in the liberal democratic states (Hajer and Kesselring 1999: 5–7). After describing the seemingly positive relationships between democracy and ecology, in the next section, we focus on the emergence of empirical discussion of non-democratic approach of environmental policy making.

2.2 China and the “Authoritarian Environmentalism”

The vivid discussion of authoritarian environmentalism in recent years is not new, as early in the last century a number of scholars explicitly criticized the anthropocentric nature of the liberal political system. Heilbroner (1974), Ophuls (1977), and Ophuls and Boyan (1992) indicated the inherited dilemma of contemporary market democratic states that had resulted in the situation of ecological crisis at the global scale. They implied that to solve the anarchic state of (global) environmental
degradation we need to restrict individuals’ rights—the freedom of unlimitedly exploiting the earth’s resources. Due to their doubt of the democratic approach’s ability to solve the urgent environmentally sensitive issues, they have been labeled proponents of authoritarian environmentalism (Blühdorn 2013b). They have particularly questioned the default principle of market liberalism that resorts to political individualism as a priority value. For instance, Ophuls (1977: 223) pessimistically points out that “current political value and institutions are the products of the age of abnormal abundance now drawing to a close, so that solutions predicated on scarcity would necessarily conflict with them.” He believes that, in order to move toward a more stable environmentally benign society, “we must determine its basic principles and then put them into effect in a planned or a designed fashion” (1977: 227). This account has imitated a vivid debate in the 1970’s. However, as Dryzek and Dunleavy (2009: 263) concluded, the (old) discussion of authoritarian environmentalism has ended simply because there has yet to be a substantial presence in the world that could fit in with this empirical regime. That said, the criticism of the current political system legitimized on the basis of *a priori* individualistic freedom and the pursuit of self-desire consumerism has still yet to stop; many commentators have in recent years further applied the so-called nondemocratic thinking to the empirical world, exploring a possible model to discuss the nondemocratic approach of climate policy. One of the probably best known works is Shearman and Smith’s (2008) contribution that focus on the US-led industrialized democratic regime, which has constantly remained a barrier of the mitigation effort of climate changes, and they are pessimistic that liberal democracy itself may be a cause of the issue. There seems to be an inclination for them to turn to the East Asian model, appealing to the efficiency of technocratic management governance for today’s protracted locked-in situation. Another seminal work was conducted by Anthony Giddens (2011). Although he did not provide any form of government as a model in his research, and although he did not explicitly consider that the democratic liberal state itself is the root cause, he did echo Ophuls’ (1977) early demands, carefully listing a nostalgic “planned” economy and again asking people to look back at the role of the state to intervene in the
environmental sphere for the aim of preventing climate catastrophe. He admitted that the act of deregulation is a factor of the cause due to short-sighted economic policy that failed to prevent the externalities of humans’ economic activities (Giddens 2011: 96), and he went on explicating how the centralization of regulatory measures has potential to effectively provide a different environmental governance strategy that goes beyond the original model of social conflict and a discordant path of environmentalism. The two scholars have, to a certain extent, initiated a recent discussion on a possible empirical environmental governance model that does not completely rely on the consensus principle of participation. However, the plight of such discussions has been incurred by many commentators, the most important criticism being, as Blühdorn (2013b: 24) pointed out, they have still not specifically illustrated how and what exact institutional mechanisms ought to be arranged. The debate on democratic participation in environmentalism still has sway in the criticism of its inner tendency of environmental and resource exploitation under market liberalism (Eckersley 2004: 87) as well as the taken-for-granted corrupt totalitarian dead end in environmental catastrophe provided by the Soviet Union model. At the same time, however, commentators have continued to emphasize the long-gaze criticism on high-carbon-reliance countries led by the major industrial pollutant countries such as the US and Canada. And some scholars have started to turn to face an unlikely case for this conversation—China.

China, as a generally considered environmentally backward state, has been attacked again and again by a number of researchers, and the ongoing discussions on the current state of global warming have almost resulted in China being the leading scapegoat. However, for some scholars, it is not necessarily just in this way. Beeson (2010) has for the first time contemplated the mode of a possibility of environmental governance under authoritarian rule, linking the research to the recent discussion on the rise of China. For him, the rise of China is not only an empirical unprecedented

5 And also to break the locked-in situation to resolve the obstacle resulted from the lobby groups’ long effort in denying the proposed climate policies in industrial states (Giddens 2011; Klein 2015).
economic phenomenon, but he believes that it can even be imagined as an alternative environmental policy-making model due to the climate urgency. While facing a survival situation, the active regime under the Chinese policy elites seems to be able to be deemed as a lesson, getting people rethinking and perhaps trying to reasonably emulate the necessary state capacity in order to protect human civilization under the eschatological threat of global warming (Beeson 2010: 289). Beeson invited readers to take a different perspective, pointing out that if the strong political control and one child policy did not exist to limit the individualism in China, the carrying capacity of the earth could possibly be on the verge of a critical point due to the explosive population. Gilley (2012) attempts to extend this analytical framework and then build the theory of an environmental policy-making model that does not a priori emphasize the democratic principle, in order to provide a clear-cut distinction between the two different theoretical approaches of climate policy making. He defines the concept of authoritarian environmentalism as “a policy process that is dominated by a relatively autonomous central state, affording little or no role for social actors or their representatives.” (Gilley 2012: 288) Gilley points out that China’s high level of state intervention in the environmental policy making can be analyzed under this theoretical framework, and the participation of mere scientific technocrats in managing and controlling the climate politics fits in with the prototype of authoritarian environmentalism. Despite this, he remains doubtful that the model could be superior to the traditional model of participatory environmental policy making, as he points out the ill of administrative decentralization in China—that is, uncoordinated interests of the central and local environmental authorities—that hinders the central government’s desire to implement policies to counter global warming. He concludes that while the policy elites have been able to generate high policy output, they have still been struggling to solve long-term problems of implementation deficit (Gilley 2012: 298). The accounts of decentralization problems have long been mentioned by a number of China watchers, such as Elizabeth Economy (2010) and Judith Shapiro (2012). Both of them have indicated that, although the central state has put forward to design and implement well-advanced
environmental policies, deficiency in implementations has resulted from low governance capacity in localities. Eaton and Kostka (2014) echoed the above account about the crippled policy execution. They examined the empirical institutions in the PRC and found that, in fact, even if the central government has strong intention to strengthen the implementation of the central environmental initiatives through a cadre turnover system, the problem that seemingly exists in only democratic states—short-termism (Westra 1998: 86)—also exists in the authoritarian state of China: being briefly in situ in locality for four years not only cannot make the local policy elites able to cultivate their local network, but the deficit of local knowledge of the officials has made the government only willing to seek quick, low quality environmental performance, rather than implement a controversial long-term environmental policy. In the aforementioned discussion, we examined the origins of the nonparticipatory approach of environmentalism and its recent debates that arise from the application of China. In the following sections, we further examine green urbanization as a case study to explore the extent to which this new strategy of centralized urban policy formulations has sought to mitigate the dichotomy of economic and environmental imperatives by the fifth generation of leaders.

3. A Top-Down Mode of “New Urbanization”

For nearly two years new urbanization (Xinxing chengzhenhua, 新型城镇化) has been an influential buzzword noticeable in official media and is, in fact, a political phenomenon commencing from the Xi-Li administration. Urbanization, as part of the modernization project of China, is to some extent related to two new leaders’ interests on the issue before they took their positions. Li Keqiang completed his doctoral thesis on this topic in 1994, entitled “On the Ternary Structure of Our Economy” (Lun woguo jingji de sanyuan jiegou, 论我国经济的三元结构), under the supervision of economist Li Yining. In the paper, Keqiang pointed out the dilemma that metropolitan areas in China may be unable to fully absorb rural migrants. In order to solve such a gradually sharpened employment problem, he recommended the household
registration system be loosened, while the development of small towns was necessary in order to mitigate the rural-urban divide. Coincidentally, Xi Jinping also mentioned the need to reform the house registration system\(^6\) in his doctoral thesis. As such, urbanization in China has long been a topic for the current policy elites. However, this has become a more complex challenge in the new era since they took power. Rapid environmental degradations as well as the uneven distribution of resources accompanied by the change of land conversion (Gaubatz 1999; Ma 2002) caused the new leaders to introduce new green policies in the urbanization program.\(^7\)

### 3.1 Crises and Unreconciled Remediation

From the five-year guidelines introduced in 2010, we saw the description of issues regarding both large-scale population mobility and environmental challenges, which are highly related to the paradox of the imperative between economic growth and environmental protection. The fourth generation of leaders has already reiterated its concern for this issue. In 2010, we saw that the “Twelfth Five-Year Guideline” (*Shi er wu guihua*, five-year guidelines, 十二五规划) highlighted the need for effective managing and controlling of the level of urbanization (Chapter 2, Section 9). In this document, the authors focused on the changes and challenges resulting from early urbanization, which have, in particular, occurred in eastern coastal areas. In the “‘Twelfth Five-Year Guideline’ of National Population Development” (*Guojia renkou fazhan ‘shi er wu’ guihua*, 国家人口发展“十二五”规划), the State Council

\(^6\) The household registration system (*Hukou*, 户口) is a longstanding institution identifying and separating agricultural/non-urban aliens and urban residents. Because of the separation, there have been increasingly unequal rights regarding education, health, family planning, employment, social security, and housing benefits.

\(^7\) The bureaucratic system of the PRC has long been defined as a model of “Fragmented Authoritarianism”: the policy-making process in China, as argued by Lieberthal and Lampton (1988: 3) is “disjointed, protracted, and incremental,” which leads to competition for interests among provinces and key bureaucracies where policy coordination is difficult to reach. The extensive bargaining politics has therefore deeply involved in the process of policy implementation among territorial and hierarchical elites (Lampton 1992).
clearly pointed out the problem with the irrational distribution of the population: a low rate of urbanization and, as a result, a large-scale floating population. This problem, despite being acknowledged by the previous generation, still seeming to worsen at an alarming rate, has become a more serious challenge requiring the immediate attention of the fifth generation of leaders. Such inherited challenge has led to a series of sharp challenges for the state to ensure a sufficient degree of social security and provision of public services. As Director of the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) Xu Shaoshi indicated,

Over 200 million migrant workers and their families have been unable to enjoy equal access to basic public services of education, employment, health care, retirement, and affordable housing as urban residents. New structural dual contradictions within urban areas have emerged, which constrains the positive effect of urbanization that could have pushed forward domestic demand and structural upgrading of the economy. There are also potential risks to the security of the society (Xu 2013).

The imbalanced distribution of the population and resources is also accompanied by the overload on environmental resources, high consumption, and high carbon emissions, which have become the top challenges for policy elites. China has conducted its development policy based on carbon energy. The previous overreliance on coal has resulted in a negative environmental impact to a massive degree all over the country (Liu and Diamond 2005). Environmental degradation, as a perceived crisis, is in particular reflected on the energy structure: By 2010, China had emerged as the world’s largest energy consumer, as its energy consumption accounted for one-fifth of the world’s consumption (Leggett 2011). In the same year, China's contribution to the world's carbon dioxide emissions was estimated to have accounted for a quarter of that of the entire world.

In addition to the high dependence on coal and the related consequences, the economic model has challenged the state’s imperative to secure its legitimacy by
maintaining high economic performance (Breslin 2013: 43). Water scarcity, soil contamination, and air pollution have not only become problems related to environmental overload (Liu and Diamond 2005; Kahn and Yardley 2007), but the problems have also emerged in a monetary way: It is estimated that the actual cost of the environmental damage in 2005 has already grown to 13.5% of GDP (Deutsch Well 2015). In addition, a number of writers have indicated that “environmental mass incidents” have increased dramatically year by year after the economic reform (Shapiro 2012: 131). As Wang stated,

The number of legal petitioners has grown astronomically as pollution has worsened throughout the country and more than 40 new specialized courts or tribunals dedicated to hearing environmental lawsuits are now hearing cases, many of them brought by public interest plaintiffs including NGOs, private citizens, and environmental protection bureaus (2011; as cited in Shapiro 2012: 128).

The overloading of the environmental capacity has been gradually emerging as a crisis and, after nearly a decade, has eventually emerged on the political agenda. These new crises and related growing anxieties have become increasingly disturbing problems to a number of commentators and policy makers. Significant warnings raised by both domestic and international media seem to have caused the political elites to realize that a crisis is emerging and that the current political-economic regime is unsustainable.

3.2 Partial Return of Centralized Planning

Thereafter, during the National People’s Congress and Chinese People’s Political Consultative Congress in 2015, we heard Li Keqiang at a press conference on the newly released government report speak bluntly, indicating that this term the State Council is going to consider environmental protection and green urbanization at the very front of the tasks in face of this new crisis (BBC 2015; Xinhua News Agency
2015). If we look at the relevant policy documents speculated for the latest two years, we can see there is an ambitious plan with a technocratic style exclusively for urbanization. In 2014, the State Council promulgated a lengthy policy document called “The National Plan of New Urbanization, 2014–2020” (Guojia xinxing chengzhenghua guihua, 2014–2020, 国家新型城镇化规划, 2014–2020), in which we saw a list of implementing strategies as to how ecology and urbanization could be arranged under a so-called “new” (as opposed to the “old”) blueprint for urban construction. In the document, policy makers highlighted urbanization as an important symbol of national modernization and set a new guiding ideology for urbanization. It stated, “[Chinese] Urbanization has been promoted against the backdrop of overpopulation, relative shortage of resources, fragile ecological environment, and uneven regional, urban, and rural development.” In order to achieve modernization, the authors of the “National Plan of New Urbanization, 2014–2020” listed several slogans: from justice, urban and rural coordination, efficiency planning, environmental and ecological conservation, cultural development, and government guiding market mechanisms to the reconfirmation of the overall organization and control by the central government. However, despite the length, the document never seemed to propose a diverse and inclusive urbanization action. On the contrary, it summarized the subject of how to complete eco-towns based on the so-called “top-level design” (Dingceng sheji, 顶层设计) (cf. Xu 2013, Twelfth Five-Year Guideline 2010).

The focus on institutional mechanisms designed at the top level implies that the policy elites were no longer purely emphasizing growth itself but that instead they were reiterating the need to “coordinately promote stable economic growth and structural optimization” (International Daily 2015). In this program advocating the importance of the scientific and technocratic bureaucracy, we saw a resort plan not

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8 These initiatives seem contrary to the joint research report “Urban China: Toward Efficient, Inclusive and Sustainable Urbanization,” coauthored by the State Department and the World Bank in 2014, which advocated an open and inclusive urbanization approach.
entirely mimic the World Bank’s suggestion, which stressed an open and participatory process as a top priority, but work from the opposite direction: Either due to the urgency of the condition or the governing nature of the party-state, the policy elites decided to cope with the drawbacks inherited in the past, intending to revise the negative consequence of administrative decentralization, in order to achieve the “quality” of development by top-down institutions. This is undoubtedly the leaders’ most worrisome concern, and as a result, the priority shifted focus by the Xi-Li administration.

When dealing with the inevitable environmental issues resulting in the process of rapid urbanization, the principles related to the quality of development seem to reflect on a series of policy documents from the past two years. One of the probably most significant documents is the revised Environmental Protection Act 2014, which came into force in 2015. It seems that a number of new tools have been incorporated in this revision to allow the central state to further strengthen its policy execution. We have seen that the central government has particularly formulated new institutional mechanisms—for example, the environmental pollution warning mechanism—that contain the “precautionary principle.” The coercive mechanism aimed to enforce the public monitoring of the local government (Article 47), and at the same time, it also sought to incentivize the local officials to develop those measures or to require the implementation of environmental objectives. It linked accountability to officials’ personal assessments for political promotion, which has long been deemed absent (Shapiro 2012). We have seen the central government recentralize the tool to punish and reward as measures provided by the Ministry of Environmental Protection, such as the right/power to detain the property of enterprises that have breached the environmental regulations and the right/power to sanction illegal enterprises.

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9 For many years, environmental legislation in China has often been considered positive, but due to the weak law enforcement, environmental governance has been severely criticized.

10 See, for instance, O’Riordan and Cameron (1995) and O’Riordan and Jordan (1994) for discussions of the concept in practice.
including sanctions in conjunction with other administrative departments such as financial and/or land use approval). Meanwhile, the revised law also added a sanction mechanism to address the malignant behavior of both the local government and enterprises, attempting to use a centralized regulatory intervention to reduce the rent-seeking behavior of business and government officials.

3.3 The Coal Conundrum

Regarding green urbanization, one of the possibly most significant keys for the delivery of policy outcomes is the restructuring of the recurrent carbon-based energy industry. On whether or not conventional utilities’ economic interests should be repressed, the fifth generation of leaders seems to be starting to show its top-down decision power in the process of policy implementation, unlike past leaders’ passive rhetoric, seeking to provide a new path toward which “energy waste could genuinely be reduced and at the same time keep the growth of economic development” (Xu 2014a). This so-called new path implies that a series of new, strict, controlling measures over the industry has been introduced with the aim to mitigate large industrial greenhouse gas emissions. It implies, for example, the central government should use a variety of tools such as energy-saving assessment reviews, environmental impact assessments, finance and land use pre-assessments, and other “gateway” controls for steel, nonferrous metals, building materials, petrochemical, and chemical industry products, requiring these business actors to implement the environmental impact assessment before being given appropriate administrative approval\(^1\) in order to solve consequences resulting from the exaggerated modernization process. In addition, for the air quality issues of particulate matter

\[1\] Although it seems too early to conclude ultimately whether China will really decouple the use of fossil fuels and economy growth, some optimistic signs have shown that, during the past two years, the amount of China’s coal use has been reduced: Economic growth in 2014 remained at the same level as the previous year, but the use of coal in 2014, however, fell by 1.6 percent (Macauley 2015). Perhaps what is more surprising is that in 2014 China’s carbon emissions also fell for the first time after being ushered in by reform and opening up. According to an estimation by the International Energy Agency, China’s annual carbon emissions fell by 2 percent in 2014 alone (Lean 2015).
(PM2.5 and PM10), we saw in 2014 a so-called top-down approach emphasizing energy and economic structural changes was reflected in a number of adjustment policies. In 2013, the “Action Plan for Atmospheric Pollution Prevention” was introduced, which was coordinated by a number of central government apparatuses combined with so-called economical civilizations to enforce the implementation process by subjecting local governments to accept the assessment of such an implantation plan.

Seeing the patterns of the policy initiatives and the implementation mechanisms by the fifth generation of leaders, we can detect that such a coercive experience has been, and perhaps will continue to be, guided by the centralized power of the state and may not be accompanied by a radical bottom-up reform of the political system. As mentioned earlier, the central government has further implemented a cap on coal electricity (Meidian zongliang guanzhi). In 2014, the NDRC also set a clear requirement for a number of key enterprises to submit their exact amount of greenhouse gas emissions (State Council 2014b). In addition, it introduced standardized guidelines for the accounting and reporting of greenhouse gas emissions for the purpose of allowing the central government to manage and control the total amount of emissions and to preempt the problems of asymmetric information in the central-local relationship in the large-scale system of governance in the PRC. According to the action plan jointly issued by the NDRC and the Ministry of Environmental Protection, at least 150 gigawatts of coal-fired electric plants should

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12 This includes the National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Environmental Protection, Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, National Bureau of Energy, and so on.


14 This refers to enterprises that reached 13,000 tons of carbon dioxide in 2010 or those corporations whose total energy consumption reached 5,000 tons of standard coal in 2010.
be terminated by 2015; then, in 2020, another 350 GW of coal power fuel will also be phased out (Xinhua 2014, as cited in China Daily 2014). The importance of this initiative is that it is an unprecedented way to incrementally phase out the use of coal that since Mao’s era has been exalted and has been considered as the only energy choice to fulfill endogenous technological development, self-sufficiency of economic development, and security in China. However, it seems the environmental safety risks have compelled the new leaders to realize the stringent necessity to restructure the energy structure at the present time. These changes can also be reflected in recent new responsibilities taken on by China in international climate politics such as the US-China cooperation.

3.4 “Development is (No Longer) Absolute Principle”

It should be noted that the purpose of the so-called new urbanization plan articulated by the policy elites is not irrelevant to reaching policy outcomes related to the common good at large. Regarding the issue of fairness and justice embedded within the urbanization project in China, if we compare the prescriptions for policy implementation on which the Hu-Wen administration and Xi-Li administration focused, we see the measures seem to have shifted toward a reform focused on diminishing the unequal rights between the urban and rural residents by using unified institutional crafting to change the chaotic policy settings at local levels. Such a policy shift was reflected in the 2014 policy document “State Council’s Opinion on Further Reform of the Household Registration System” (Guowuyuan guanyu jingyibu tuijin huji zhidu gaigede yijian), in which a kind of “new household registration system” was highlighted. The central government seemed to seek to normalize and standardize urban immigrants’ status, advocating “a unified urban and rural household registration system.”\(^\text{15}\) The measures included an attempt to fully implement a

\(^{15}\) This policy is an attempt to eliminate the household distinction of agricultural and non-hukou aliens and to promote a unified system for the registration of residents, thereby placing all public services into a single information system to obtain control. Here, the town identity number is a unique identifier, enabling the central government to garner political control by more or less dispelling information
residence permit (Juzhuzheng, 居住证) system and accelerate the construction and sharing of a national population information database. This shift seemed to again imply that a top-down measure should be implemented in order to further mitigate the gap in welfare between the rural settlers in cities and the urban citizens in terms of the inequality in the access to education, employment, and health benefits.16

In addition to the lifting of urban and rural household registration restrictions in different provinces, in this round of “comprehensive reform” launched by the Xi-Li Administration, we have seen an attempt to reconfigure social security policies that are to be centrally integrated: The central government has sought to change the current regime of pension schemes by gradually implementing a “unified pension scheme for the rural and urban residents” (Xu 2014b). Besides this, a broader central policy measure introduced at the end of 2014, the “Comprehensive National Pilot Program of New Urbanization” (Guangjia xinxing chengzhenhua zonghe shidian fangan), more actively designated 64 new administrative units for the experiment of the pilot policy, which is expected to commence in the coastal provinces and to be adapted to local conditions. The policy process has been designed to collect the preliminary outcomes of the experiment in 2017; afterward, the central state will seek to synthesize the experience of these local experiences and to “implant” these models throughout the whole territory of China between 2018 and 2020 (People’s Daily 2015).

In the synthesis of the aforementioned mapping regarding the policy of new urbanization, we learned that the current policy practice is shifting its priority toward a process in which the central state has decided to implement a more emphatic centralized execution of policy that seems to have risen to an increasingly irresistible sense of crisis, mounting awareness of environmental consciousness among citizens.

16 Yu Jia and Ding Jiahong (2008) have conducted an empirical analysis of the unfair treatment of migrant workers, which has long been experienced because of the lack of household status in cities, pointing out the structural discrimination of the existing regime.
The Xi-Li administration sought to refocus on the policy overlooked in the past (including by the fourth generation of leaders), which was regarded as a marginal domain and lower policy priorities. Urbanization or environmental protections are certainly not something new, but they demonstrate institutional changes on the basis of the level of urgency. All in all, the leadership of this term seems to be focused more on the execution of the urban policy. The central state now seeks to “manage” the process of urbanization and also seeks to strengthen the technocratic capacity of “managing” uncertain environmental risks *en avance* to prevent and to mitigate potential conflicts between immigrants and urban residents in the process of development.

4. Conclusion

In the above analysis, our study on the case through the priorities of the different leaders showed that, at the level of institutional strategies, the process of green urbanization indicates a transitional paradigm of authoritarian environmentalism, which differentiated the Hu-Wen and Xi-Li administrations in regarding centralization as a government policy tool. In other words, the top-down mode of governing strategies (*Dingceng sheji*) has been seen as a kind of state managing approach for reconciling endogenous contradictory imperatives of developmental and environmental needs. Under the fifth generation of leadership, we find that, in operating practices, the participatory mode of decision-making that originated from the emancipatory tradition of environmentalism in the Western context is still lacking in the decision making process; in the face of the situation of crisis, the Chinese Communist Party did not seek to set its policy in accordance to the global environmental governance paradigm—sustainable development—to delegate the policy decision-making power to the lower level of government and to cultivate dialogue in the civil society. On the contrary, they have sought to implement the opposite institutional reconfigurations of “New Urbanization”: “defragmented instruments” that use cohesive political control mechanisms to re-centralize policy
incentives and enforcement implementations with the aim of reduce negative consequences of rapid modernization. Being aware of the policy differences in its large-scale treatment system, the policy elites standardize the implementation of urban policies from top to bottom. The recent policy documents indicate that the new preference is intended to strengthen the existing top-level structure of the hierarchical command system to consolidate the powers of environmental and urban planning.

This change of defragmented environmentalism is precisely designed to solve the drawbacks of economic decentralization since the reform and opening-up process, which include large-scale population flux, unequal development between migration and urban residents, and naturally, carbon emissions and the arising crisis of environmental setback resulting from the modernization process. The process of rapid modernization monolithically focuses on accumulating local GDP data that show the lack of policy incentives for mitigating the justice gap and the under performance of environmental policies. The findings show that the policy leaders have sought to regain control through direct intervention of the carbon-reliance industry. And the central state has conducted institutional punishing mechanisms by imposing rules over the coal industry, attempting to go beyond the tradition of Western environmentalism that has long failed to resolve the dilemma: the binary oppositions have been a conflict between the state and non-state actors under the guidelines of stakeholder participation but still failed to effectively limit the monopolization of large private fossil fuel giants (Giddens 2011). The effect of emerging defragmented authoritarian environmentalism seems to come from the opposite expectation of those who advocate for decentralization as a tool to solve ecological crisis—to go beyond limiting the veto players’ participation in the policy process. The changing patterns of the governing process in “new urbanization” indicate that the policy elites have been trying, in a way, to restore some of the centralized planning decisions in order to accelerate the implementation process that has long been constrained by interest negotiation “among and between levels of the hierarchy” (Lampton 1992: 57). The so-called new green urbanization process promoted by the fifth generation of leaders seems to be based and built on a shaky yet decisive process that aims to consolidate
the Party's controlling mechanisms in the process of modernization, albeit with a partial return of a centralized planning mode of decision making combining the non-participating mechanisms under the established hierarchical model to resolve the long ill of fragmented authoritarianism (Lieberthal and Oksenberg 1988; Lampton 1992) described by a number of China watchers.
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