

Environmental Initiatives and Citizen Participation in the Local Government in China

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ABSTRACT

This research is a general report on the current environmental initiatives and citizen participation measures in China trickling down to the local government based on the commitment to short- and long-term strategies aimed at protecting the environment through eco-security and improving cooperation among different levels of society. This study seeks to find what the local governments have done after the commitment, the theoretical system and governance model of the environmental initiatives and citizen participation in China, and the influencing factors of the environmental initiatives and citizen participation. Using the commendatory literature methods, the author found that case and comparative studies are rare. The relevant theoretical models abroad are based on the dichotomy of state and society, which is outside China's national conditions and has some limitations in their application. China still needs a relatively mature theoretical system and governance model to guide citizens' participation in environmental governance.

Keywords: environmental initiatives; citizen participation; the governance theory; China

INTRODUCTION

Environmental problems brought by rapid industrialization and climate change have been a growing concern for governments. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals highlighted the need for global organizations, national governments, and local authorities to implement sustainable plans on affordable and clean energy, sustainable cities and communities, and climate action. According to the 2016 National Review of UN Sustainable Development Goals, China vowed to adhere to short and long-term strategies aimed at protecting the environment through eco-security and improving cooperation among different levels of society, and peaking carbon neutrality was mentioned by China at the 75th session of the UN General Assembly in September 2020. Based on these commitments, the current environmental initiatives and citizen participation measures in China could be further explored to provide a general report on the extent international and national measures trickle down to the local government.

THE THEORETICAL ORIGIN OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE

THE DEMOCRATIC THEORY OF PARTICIPATION

John. Mill's indirect democracy was full of power abuse and corruption and ended up as the elite's rule tool, which deepened the unequal distribution of political discourse power and created divisions between the public and the state. In this context, based on summing up the democratic thoughts of Rousseau, Mill, Kohl, and so on, Carole Pateman refines the participatory democracy, explores the realization way of the classical direct democracy, and promotes the process of modern democratization forward. She believes that the local level is the best place for the "social training" of democracy, and the values of freedom, equality, responsibility, and so on can only be realized by the direct participation of the public in concrete

affairs and the concept of "Participatory Society" has thus emerged. Participatory democracy attempts to eliminate the "democratic deficit" by introducing direct democracy under the framework of indirect democracy. So participatory democracy is a "strong democracy" because participatory democracy is an effective restriction of administrative power and can prevent the encroachment of bureaucratic rule on civil society.

THE PUBLIC GOVERNANCE THEORY

The theory of public governance is a brand-new idea that has been put forward since the 1990s to solve the problems of government failure, such as the monopoly of public service by bureaucracy and the inefficiency of management. It is a minimalist state. The most striking feature of this theory is the emphasis on the pluralism of governing institutions, and the government is no longer the only institution to solve public problems (Shi, 2019). It is also in this context, to resolve the twin crises of "government failure" and "market failure," Eleanor Ostrom broke the dichotomy between government and market and put forward the theory of multi-center governance and self-governance, in addition to the "visible hand" of the government and the "invisible hand" of the market (Ostrom, 1961). It is also possible to use the "own hand" of users to solve the governance dilemma of collective human action in the face of public problems.

THE SOCIAL CAPITAL THEORY

Social capital arises from the contacts and interactions between people, including goodwill, a feeling of compatriots, compassion, and social interaction. It is a social resource that can satisfy the needs and interests of individuals to a certain extent. It emphasizes a social network relationship, which provides members with various resources that can be used. Putnam's definition of social capital broadens the scope of social capital. Social capital is a collective rather than an individual-owned convenience and resource at the macro level. It has a significant impact on economic development and social governance. He believed that "social capital is composed of a series of trust, networks, and norms, which can promote the achievement of cooperation will, and thus improve work efficiency." His view has been recognized by many scholars at home and abroad.

The theory of participatory democracy and public governance are devoted to solving the problems of "government failure" and "market failure." The above theories provide theoretical solid support and guidance for public environmental participation. "And the universal trust, reciprocity norm, and citizen participation network in social capital theory provide a solid psychological foundation, institutional guarantee and essential platform for participatory environmental governance (Tao, 2016; Hu, 2019).

THE BASIS OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE

STRONG DEMAND FOR PARTICIPATION

Studies have shown that the higher the level of economic development of a country, the higher the need for citizen participation in the governance of the country. With the development of China's economy, the demand for public involvement in environmental management is rising, and the public's participation has broken the power pattern of ecological protection (Tu, Deng, Gan, 2018). Especially after entering the new development period, significant challenges have taken place in the PRC. Substantial developments in policymaking and legislation still need to be improved to tackle the degradation of the environment, and tremendous challenges remain in environmental health and the fields of natural resources governance. All these challenges

affect the public, especially people with low incomes. And the absence of public participation in the original administrative government has caused widespread dissatisfaction among the general public. As a result, the number of environmental protests has grown. As one of the ecological interest bodies, they have the need and the right to participate in environmental governance (Guo, 2021).

THE NEED TO PROTECT CITIZENS' ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS

The 2006 Provisional Measures for Public Participation in Environmental Impact Assessment, the Government Information Disclosure Regulations issued by the State Council in 2007, and the Government Information Disclosure Guide for Environmental Impact Assessments of Construction Projects published by the Ministry of Environmental Protection in 2013, all made concrete stipulations about citizens' environmental rights.

As a fundamental human right, there have been growing calls for environmental rights to be integrated into the Constitution in recent years. Environmental rights include the right to participate in legislation, the right to participate in environmental decision-making, the right to participate in environmental governance, and the right to supervise the environment. But all these regulations are weak and poorly enforced, and the problematic eco-environmental situation in China still infringes on citizens' environmental rights. Only participatory governance can better promote realizing these rights (Zhang, Jin, 2014).

THE SUCCESSFUL CASES OF PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE AT HOME AND ABROAD

Since the 1980s, participatory governance has emerged in the United States, India, Brazil, and other countries. After decades of practice, it has effectively advanced the democratic process and enhanced citizen participation, improving the local ecological environment (Zhao, 2009).

In response to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, states are encouraged to search for and utilize renewable energy sources and other means to ensure environmental protection, especially to promote citizen participation in environmental governance. In the United States, the national government has cooperated with city officials to ensure that financial strategies are in place to harness and maximize efficient energy sources (Wang, Liu, & Hawkins, 2017). This cooperation between national and local governments has enabled most cities to create a new norm in their localities by advocating renewable energy sources like solar panels and electric vehicles instead of relying heavily on fossil fuels. In Australia, Mey et al. (2016) highlighted the critical role of the local government in motivating its citizens to shift to environmentally friendly practices and in using the allocated budget for localized projects. In China, such as the "Jiaxing Model" have realized a co-governance system that promotes the affection of ecological and environmental governance (Xin, 2016).

THE SUPPORT OF THE GOVERNMENT

Although a single-party system still governs China, the centralized and authoritarian nature of public administration in this country has evolved from a draconian, idealistic fusion of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist Communism to a more dynamic, post-modern, China's brand of Communism (Hendrischke, 2002). Thus, a slight change in the national governance dynamics may drastically impact specific ways of governance at the local level, which covers environmental initiatives and citizen participation. Over the years, more and more policies have supported citizen participation in environmental protection. The "Environmental Protection Law of the People's Republic of China," implemented in 2015, set up an "Information Disclosure and Public Participation" chapter to establish and protect the public's right to participate in the environment. In 2017, the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China put

forward an environmental governance system of "government-led, enterprise as the mainstay, social organization and public participation," which provides policy guidance for China to move towards a new stage of joint governance by government, enterprises and the public. Public participation in environmental governance is clearly defined in the Environmental Impact Assessment Law of the PRC in 2018. All these policies are enforced at the local level. For example, the 14th five-year plan for ecological and environmental protection in Guangxi aims to improve the responsibility system for all-people actions in environmental governance. Following this plan, the local government will strengthen social supervision, improve mechanisms for public participation, optimize the platform for ecological complaints and reports, and open up channels for complaints.

Although the implementation of eco-environmental participatory governance not only has a strong theoretical basis but also has a solid practical basis, the theory of participatory democracy, the theory of public governance or the theory of social capital and so on, which are all exotic products and based on the state-society dichotomy, their implementation needs civil society. If there is no civil organization and no civil society, participatory governance will become empty talk. In the reality of China's civil society, exploring a way of participatory governance in line with China's national conditions is the next step in the direction of relevant researchers.

THE EFFECTS OF CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE

THE POSITIVE EFFECTS OF CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE

Some studies have shown that the degree of public participation in environmental governance and the effect of environmental governance present a certain positive relationship. Newig and Fritsch (2008) undertake a meta-analysis of 47 cases of participatory environmental governance to test hypotheses about the interaction between multi-level governance, public participation, and policy implementation. Their analysis suggests that a polycentric governance system comprising many agencies yields higher environmental outputs than monocentric governance. Fung and Wright (2001) briefly examine five reform experiments that differ in design details, issue areas, and scope. Still, they all aspire to deepen how ordinary people can effectively participate in policies directly affecting their lives. They found that these reforms all generate a range of desirable social effects. Ernst (2019) found that citizen participation in environmental governance can foster social learning and contributes to a transformation toward sustainable development. Citizen participation in environmental governance can promote citizen welfare maximization and is one of the most promising paths to overcoming environmental governance barriers and achieving effective environmental governance. Of course, many facts also prove the effectiveness of public participation in environmental governance: Firstly, public participation has promoted the state's environmental legislation, strengthened the environmental law enforcement of functional departments, and prompted the state to act. Secondly, the public's participation has strengthened the supervision and tip-offs of pollution sources, and the exposure to pollution has increased the pollution cost of enterprises and prompted them to act. Thirdly, the public's participation has aroused and disseminated environmental awareness, which motivates citizens to act. In short, public participation harmonizes the environmental interests of the government, enterprises, the citizen and promotes tripartite cooperation in tackling environmental pollution (Tu, Deng, & Gan, 2018). The most important thing is that public participation is a vital link to realizing democracy and "good governance," which guarantees the legitimacy, rationality, scientificity and democracy of the government's decision-making and can prevent the loss of control of public power to a certain extent. It can promote substantive environmental equity, effectively

resolve social contradictions, and maintain social harmony and stability (Pan, 2014). It can reduce the cost of environmental governance by reducing social misunderstanding. It can strengthen the green concept, promote sustainable development, and build a resource-saving, environment-friendly society. In short, these scholars believe participation can improve the quality of decisions, contribute to empowerment, and lead to public support for planning decisions. As a result, it leads to effective and efficient implementation processes.

THE ADVERSE EFFECTS OF CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE

While some scholars advocate participatory governance, others point to its potential adverse effects. For example, the public in environmental governance will increase the management and time costs. Turnhout, Bommelman & Aarts (2010) provides a perspective beyond overly optimistic views of participation. They believe participation includes some and excludes other citizens without the required knowledge and skills, represses differences and requires citizens to achieve consensus, reinforces dominant frameworks and expects citizens to accept them. Benson et al. (2014) evaluated the processes, communities, outputs and outcomes of participation in WFD river basin management in England and Wales, found that whether stakeholder involvement had contributed to planning quality was mixed, and the impact of participation on environmental quality is problematic.

THE CAUSAL FACTORS OF CITIZENS' PARTICIPATION IN ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE IN CHINA

The effect of citizen participation in environmental governance in China is not ideal. This is manifested in the passive participation, ex-post participation and disorderly participation of citizens and relevant environmental organizations. There are also problems such as the government's low responsiveness to public participation, the stylized form of the response and the single channel of the response. The causal factors of citizens' participation in environmental governance in China include six factors: The first is the thought factor. The awareness of environmental protection and participation of some citizens and organizations is weak. The level of participation consciousness directly influences the environmental participation behavior of citizens. The survey found that the willingness of civic participation is closely related to their level of education and self-interest, and participation is a rational economic behavior. The willingness to participate is also influenced by the public's capacity and the government's determination to govern. The second is psychological factors. In environmental governance, Chinese citizens have low levels of trust in the government due to the corruption and inaction of some officials. This crisis of trust is also the main cause of environmental protests. The third is the organization factor. Independent social organizations are indispensable to democracy. Due to various reasons of history and reality, most social organizations lack independence and have strong administrative color in China, which makes it difficult to play the role of self-governance (Shen, 2013). The fourth is the institutional and political factors. The "center-edge" social structure, the imperfect participation mechanism and the excessive intervention of administrative means lead to the citizens' discourse power of the ecological environment missing, and the citizens eventually fall into the predicament of having "no way to participate." The fifth is the legal factor. The imperfect environmental public interest litigation system and the lack of relevant laws to protect citizens' environmental rights and interests have resulted in the lack of reliable institutional guarantees and legal basis for public participation in environmental governance. The sixth is the cultural factor. In the past, quite a long historical period, the Chinese people all belonged to a controlled social group. At the same time, the people relied on government control, resulting in a lack of independent

political personality. This obedience ideology and culture has somewhat hindered citizens' enthusiasm for participating in the governance of the ecological environment.

THE PATHS OF CITIZENS' PARTICIPATION IN ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE

There is a need for policymaking to learn how to design and run public participation, aiming to improve environmental policy delivery. Scholars have different opinions on different paths of participation. Sherry Arnstein believes citizen participation is citizen power. He divides public participation into three degrees: Nonparticipation degrees include manipulation and therapy; degrees of tokenism include informing, consultation and placation; degrees of citizen power include partnership, delegated power, and citizen control (Arnstein, 1969). Wesselink et al. (2011) found varying and potentially conflicting rationales for participation, with instrumental and legalistic rationales dominating. The found are derived from Fiorino (1990) and subsequent work by Blackstock and Richard (2007) and Stirling (2006). The Normative rationale call for maximum participation. It allows all affected by a decision to have influence and includes all participants' concerns and views in all stages and issues. The Substantive rationale aims to increase the breadth and depth of information and improve the quality of decisions. It includes those who have additional knowledge and see problems, issues, and solutions that experts miss. In the Instrumental rationale, policy goals are not open for discussion. It includes those who have power and those who are needed for implementation and supports incumbent interests. In the Legalistic rationale, participation is only organized to meet formal requirements, it is likely to be a formality without any uptake of results, and procedural pressure is the only reason that participation is organized. Lowndes, V., Pratchett and G. Stoker found the CLEAR model, which could diagnose and correct failures of government participation, is divided into five levels: "Can," "Like," "Enabled," "Asked," and "Responded." The model reveals some elements to promote citizen participation in governance and provides valuable experience for improving citizen participation in eco-environmental governance (Zhou, 2019). we need to see the inclusion of not only government at different levels but also non-governmental actors in multi-level governance. In environmental governance, the participation of non-governmental actors is essential to MLG. The participation of non-governmental actors has been proposed as a way to overcome the lack of effectiveness in environmental policymaking (Newig & Fritsch, 2008).

Besides these rationales and models, many scholars have put forward more detailed measures. Kim and Lee (2019) believed that citizens are more likely to be involved in public matters if they perceive their government to be more transparent, which could be achieved by regularly posting updates on various media forms. To address the role of local government in the sustainable development of Gold Coast in Australia, Cuthill (2002) highlighted the strengths of a collaborative approach involving the local citizens to brainstorm new initiatives and enforce policies with local government units. From a survey among 1300 provincial and city leaders in China, Meng et al. (2017) found that Chinese leaders have a positive response to the idea of citizen participation through various means as long as there is a sense of trust and transparency between the stakeholders.

CONCLUSIONS

As mentioned above, there are outstanding achievements in environmental initiatives and citizen participation in the Local government. However, there is still room for further improvement in the following aspects:

Scholars at home and abroad have conducted in-depth discussions on issues related to public participation in environmental governance from different perspectives. Most of the

literature focuses on the applied research of public environmental participation, such as the influencing factors, mechanism and system construction of public environmental participation. However, case studies and comparative studies are rare.

Given the participatory governance theory model, the research abroad started earlier, and the governance theory and model are relatively mature. At the same time, China still lacks a relatively mature theoretical system and governance model to guide citizens' participation in environmental governance. The relevant theoretical models abroad are based on the dichotomy of state and society, which is not in line with China's national conditions and has some limitations in their application.

Lack of empirical research on influencing factors of participatory governance. In light of the influential factors of citizen participation in environmental governance, scholars have conducted in-depth analyses from various perspectives and drawn different conclusions. However, most of these conclusions are based on qualitative research and lack empirical research.

The operability of citizen participation in ecological environment governance should be improved. Scholars have different opinions on different paths of participation. Many scholars have put forward more detailed measures, but most of the measures are made from the government's point of view. Some proposals are not operable. For example, how to balance the tension between government-dominated and citizen participation and how to coordinate the relationship between democracy and bureaucracy, most of the literature does not give a satisfactory answer. So, it is inevitable to analyze the influencing factors of public participation in environmental governance from different angles and tries to put forward more concrete and feasible public participation measures in environmental governance.

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