

# Reflections on China's Campaign-Style Environmental Governance and the Way Forward

(Translated from Chinese)

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"Campaign-style governance" refers to a centralized governance approach that is enforced by various administrative agencies over a relatively concentrated period of time through the use of concerted human, material and financial resources, as well as involvement of the public and the media. Oftentimes, campaign-style governance aims to fight against illegal practices. It has been widely adopted in the process of coping with smog across China, and played a positive role in mitigating air-pollution and improving ambient air quality. However, the model has been criticized as a one-size-fits-all governance approach that tends to employ overly simple and extreme measures that often only deliver temporary results.

With regard to tackling environmental problems, the Chinese government applied campaign-style governance as early as the end of the last century, even though the historical pedigree of these campaigns goes back to the early days of the PRC. Beyond the field of environmental protection, this phenomenon of Chinese administrative management has appeared in areas such as social stability management, resource conservation, and food safety. This paper discusses a number of relevant studies, some of which question the legitimacy of campaign-style governance, while others examine the causes of, and the way forward for, campaign-style governance with regard to China's current social management and its environmental governance.

**Luo Xusheng (2005)**, Associate Professor of Southwest University of Political Science and Law, does not regard campaign-style governance as a long-term social governance mechanism that meets the requirements of the rule of law. In specific enforcement activities, campaign-style enforcement generally takes the form of centralized rectification (集中整治), specialized governance (专项治理), enforcement blitz (突击执法), special operation (特别行动), and specialized enforcement (专项执法). It is characterized by united action, vigorous momentum, consistent direction, indicative figures, but without a long-term legitimate mechanism.

**Qi Fanhua (2015)**, Research Fellow of the National Academy of Development and Strategy and Professor of the School of Public Administration at Renmin University of China, outlines the point of view that campaign-style governance erodes the authority of rules and laws, and as a manifestation of the "rule of man", runs contrary to law-based governance. While law-based governance represents a pathway for modern national governance, campaign-style governance

is usually accompanied by severe and drastic punishment. The legal focus on severe and drastic penalties, especially imposing penalties that are harsher than normal for the same violations, conflicts with the principle of fairness in the rule of law. Regulations lose authority once they become flexible.

**Li Ganjie (2019)**, former Minister of Ecology and Environment, makes a critical appraisal of the model of campaign-style governance based on its causes in the environmental field. He clearly attributes campaign-style environmental governance to the negligence of leaders and cadres in normal times, including both local environmental authorities and local governments, party committees and their principals. For a long time, local governments and party committees have attached great importance to economic development, and even completely ignored environmental cost in the pursuit of growth of gross domestic product (GDP) and fiscal revenue. In this context, local environmental departments can only turn a blind eye to environmental problems brought about by economic development. Now, China has set forth stringent environmental quality objectives, and put in place extremely strict assessment and accountability mechanisms, such as co-responsibility of party committees and governments (党政同责) and environmental inspections of central and provincial governments. However, the nearly deformed industrial structures in various areas have a long-standing problem that cannot be solved overnight, making it difficult to reverse the unfavorable environmental situation in a short period of time. Therefore, some local governments have rushed to implement overly strict and chaotic enforcement ( “急时乱作为” ). Not only non-compliant pollution-intensive enterprises are shut down, but also numerous compliant enterprises are forced to limit and halt production. Even worse, extreme behaviors that severely affect and undermine livelihoods take place, such as closing small restaurants, removing residential stoves, and dismantling farming nets.

Even though more than a few commentators view campaign-style governance from a rather critical perspective, there are other scholars who emphasize its benefits. In 1990 when he taught in the Department of International Politics of Fudan University, **Wang Huning**, Standing Committee Member of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee and Secretary of the CPC Secretariat, wrote that the root cause of the emergence of campaign-style governance in China lies in the tension between the demand for ultra-large-scale social governance and the scarcity of limited social resources. The current availability of governance resources directly determines the governing approach and capacity. The form of social regulation is by no means a product of personal likes and dislikes, but depends on the allowable level of total social resources. In short, the lack of total social resources is the fundamental reason behind the emergence of campaign-style governance in many administrative fields in China.

27 years later, **Chang Jiwen (2017)**, Deputy Director of the Development Research Center of the State Council, still holds a similar view to Wang Huning. He argues that campaign-style governance in the environmental field arises because the needs of China's social governance exceed the social resources capacity at the current stage. Although China's current environmental protection goals are morally commendable and point to the right direction, but they have been

employed in an overly hasty manner – with poor planning, strategy, approach, pace and intensity any measures will inevitably lead to broad-brush practices ( “一刀切” [literally: to cut with one blade]) and other serious social and economic problems. The environmental legal system should be stringent like a sharp blade, but it could cause problems if not applied properly. Environmental protection goals, requirements, and plans should not violate the laws of economic development, or the technical rules and the laws of environmental protection. Within a certain period of social development, it is unlikely to make more environmental strides as further breakthroughs rest on new economic and technological foundations. In the early stage, strict enforcement and inspection that forced companies to strengthen environmental protection did yield certain results, but gave a considerable blow to the traditional real economy. At present, such measures have been basically exhausted, with little room for further breakthrough. China now encounters a bottleneck period of environmental protection due needed new technological and economic innovation. If environmental protection goals are unrealistic and high beyond reach at this time, and if there is a blind pursuit of a better quality of the environment, then local governments may adopt overly hasty broad-brush practices as the political pressure trickles down the hierarchy.

**Qi Fanhua (2015)** considers it impossible and irrational to immediately and completely ban campaign-style governance. A reasonable strategy should be to classify public issues into categories and adopt differentiated and targeted governance approaches. For common public issues, such as food safety, environmental protection, assistance to the poor, education development in poor areas, and urban drainage system renovation, there should be standards and mechanisms to facilitate routine governance (常态治理) with a focus on the implementation of a system. Campaign-style governance is not suitable for this latter category. On the other hand, for sporadic and urgent public issues, such as earthquakes, floods, hazardous weather, epidemics, and unexpected environmental problems, temporary institutions can be formed to coordinate different departments and mobilize various resources for a campaign-style response. Yet, how such a response to public issues will turn out still depends on the foundations of routine governance. Therefore, the outlined strategy of categorizing governance responses is essentially suggesting a path of gradual transformation.

**Li Ganjie (2019)** also emphasizes that environmental authorities should further focus on the weak links of local environmental remediation by replacing campaign-style management with effective routine management. The relevant environmental departments should pay close attention to urban public management issues of concern, such as garbage, dust, odor, and noise, which are strongly related to the livelihoods of people, as well as direct sewage discharge, black and odorous water, and environmental problems such as forest and grassland destruction, lake occupation, and mine exploitation. Li Ganjie also notes that the resolution of environmental problems requires a certain process. For non-compliant private companies, an appropriate period of time should be allowed for rectification to meet the standards as long as they take action. However, this does not mean that environmental protection requirements are relaxed for these companies. It is unacceptable that these companies do not make rectification within the

given period and compromise the public interest for their own interest.

*Hebei.net* reporter **Guo Huiyan (2019)** combs through various materials and finds that some areas in China are introducing measures to replace the model of campaign-style environmental governance. A more refined management has been applied to change the one-size-fits-all approach to a more problem-specific slant of environmental governance. For example, Hebei Province issued the *Hebei Emergency Plan Against Heavy Pollution Weather (Revised Edition)*, in which the "Positive List System for Environmental Supervision" is particularly noticeable. According to the document, based on the precondition that they meet certain environmental management requirements, companies and projects included in the positive list can be free from production suspension, production restriction, check, and disturbance (hereinafter referred to as "Four Noes") during the period of an emergency emissions reduction campaign during heavy air pollution events. So far, the positive list involves 1,640 projects or companies.

By reviewing the above-outlined views on campaign-style environmental governance, the following conclusions can be drawn:

First, regular proactive action by local governments and environmental departments is an important starting point for fundamentally solving environmental problems. It is very necessary for the Ministry of Ecology and Environment to make specialized rectification efforts with the aim of urging active action at the local level. Nevertheless, the major reasons why many local governments adopt a one-size-fits-all approach to environmental enforcement includes defective local industrial structures, stringent environmental quality objectives, and exceptionally stern environmental inspection and accountability mechanisms. Changes in the irrational industrial structure and energy mix through regular proactive measures are crucial and fundamental to solving environmental problems, but they cannot be accomplished overnight. In contrast, local governments are tasked to take measures to achieve the tight environmental management objectives as soon as possible. From the perspective of local administrators, the issue seems to be unsolvable: there is no room for compromising on centrally assigned environmental objectives, while results of normal proactive action are slow to come by – compared to the temporary one-size-fits-all "broad-brush" practices that local governments are criticized for when they implement a given campaign.

Second, at this stage, the key to moving beyond campaign-style governance in environmental protection lies in refining management categories. The issues that can be effectively managed with existing normal governance (常态治理) resources should be included in a list of routine governance (常态治理的正面清单). For the problems that cannot be effectively solved by the existing normal governance methods, temporary campaign-style governance can be considered under the framework of national environmental control objectives. The "Four Noes" released by Hebei Province is undoubtedly very attractive to enterprises, but the conditions for entry into the positive list are very stringent. They include emissions compliance, self-implementation of emissions reductions, pollution control techniques and others. In addition, the positive list is not static, but subject to adjustment every six months. Against the backdrop of China's reiterated

request for avoiding one-size-fits-all approach in environmental protection, Hebei is the first in the country to establish the positive list system, an innovative initiative for targeted air pollution control. By means of classified policies and positive incentives, the positive list system gives priority to ensuring the production and operation activities of compliant companies and projects.

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