

AIS General Research Fund (GRF) and Early Career Scheme (ECS) Success Round 2016-17

Project Title:

Local Actors, Institutions and Mechanisms: Unraveling Inter-governmental Dynamics of Climate Governance in China

Brief Abstract:

How do local states in China respond to climate change? While China's national climate policy-making has been extensively researched, few studies to date have examined the making of local climate governance in the Chinese setting where inter-governmental relations (the political/economic dichotomy of 'political centralization' and 'economic decentralization' in modeling the dynamics of central-local relations) continue to play critical part in almost every policy domain. In fact, successful climate initiatives from the center would inevitably depend on the extent to which the central mandates could successfully translate into local practice. Empirical assessment on the latest developments, however, has been missing.

Theories of 'multi-level governance' and 'experimentation under hierarchy' help to understand local activism and the generation of institutional changes in China, but their relevance and validity in China's climate governance remain much less studied. By exploring the Yangtze River Delta (YRD, an area that embraces enormous economic might while facing high climate vulnerability) governments' policy innovations to tackle climate change, this study aims to address the following questions: 1) How do subnational governments exercise foresighted tinkering under a shadow of a hierarchical authority structure when contemplating climate governance? 2) Are policy breakthroughs or institutional innovations within individual YRD provinces more like reactions to central policy signals, or bottom-up initiatives originated by the local climate authorities (and climate scientists/activists)? And why? 3) If local governments remain very much driven by the policy momentum of the central authorities, how do experiments in the guise of pilot trading programs or climate legislation affect institutional and policy adaptation beyond the province(s) involved? 4) Why inter-provincial climate cooperation is missing while in other policy fields such as economic development inter-provincial cooperation exists?

This study will examine the remarkable diversity in the development of innovative climate measures and policy outcomes by the three YRD governments, and therefore test the relevance of the prevailing 'multi-level governance' model, exploring whether the subnational governments have taken assertive climate actions that transform themselves into policy agents shaping the policy making of the higher authorities, working alongside their peers and collaborating with non-state actors. We will also analyze how the 'shadow of hierarchy' lingers and spurs the local climate responses and innovations from below. By explaining the conspicuous absence of inter-provincial climate collaboration, the study fills important analytical gaps in literature and enriches the understanding of inter-governmental dynamics in subnational climate governance in China and beyond.

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