

Scientific Note

Authoritarian Practices in the Sanjiangyuan Region, China

Ecological resettlement of Tibetan rural population

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Abstract

How do authoritarian regimes handle and manage climate change? By focusing on China, this paper explores a specific type of environmental governance sustained through the country's authoritarian practices. This analysis of the ecological migration policy targeting the Tibetan population in Sanjiangyuan highlights the means through which China perpetrates its control over the nomad communities legitimized by sustainable justifications furthering non-environmental goals that disregard local citizens' preferences and needs. Through means of secrecy, disinformation, and disabling voice, this paper demonstrates that the ecological migration policy constitutes an authoritarian practice by the Chinese government, and it considers the negative repercussions for the human rights and freedom of the affected individuals.

Evidence for Practice

- Authoritarian regimes implementing ecological policies for tackling climate change often manage environmental concerns via public policies and strict regulations of individuals' behaviors.
- China has been enforcing the resettlement of the Tibetan population in the Sanjiangyuan region driven by motives labeled as ecological. Nevertheless, research shows that this policy constitutes an authoritarian practice that reinforces the power of the central government.
- By employing means of secrecy, disinformation, and disabling voice, China is increasing its control over the Tibetan nomadic population by enforcing illegitimate conditions limiting the freedom of the targeted local population.

Keywords: Climate change, Tibet, China, authoritarianism, environmental authoritarianism

Introduction

Climate change is one of the most threatening challenges of our times, and to successfully mitigate it, humans need to revolutionize their production systems, lifestyles, and activities (European Environmental Agency, n.d.). China is one of the most significant contributors to greenhouse gases (GHG) globally, but despite these worrying trends, the country continues to implement effective environmental policies. Scholars argue this is possible because the government's central power can manage environmental concerns via public policies and strict regulations of individuals' behaviors implemented hierarchically (Li & Shapiro, 2020). Such a type of governance is defined as environmental authoritarianism. Nevertheless, despite the effectiveness of this model, concerns relating to ethically questionable governmental practices might arise. For this reason, this paper will explore the ecological migration policy (EMP) enacted by the Chinese government in the 2000s to prevent desertification and soil deterioration in the Sanjiangyuan region in China. By exploring the resettlement of thousands of Tibetan families, the environmental authoritarian governance of China is explored through a practice-oriented approach, therefore considering the authoritarian practices that the government enacts against Tibetans for the ostensible goal of environmental preservation. Academic research on the topic remains limited, as scholars only recently linked sustainable governance to authoritarian policymaking. This paper presents an innovative lens to the topic of environmental authoritarianism by analysing the means employed by the Chinese government to further the goals of the state. I answer the research question "*How does China's ecological resettlement of the Tibetan rural population in Sanjiangyuan constitute an authoritarian practice?*" by displaying instances where China employs means of *secrecy*, *disinformation*, and *disabling voice* against the Tibetan nomadic communities.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, various definitions of authoritarianism are considered, consequently explaining the concepts of environmental authoritarianism and authoritarian practices. Second, China's environmental authoritarian model is discussed, followed by the case study of the EMP in Sanjiangyuan. Third, the

methodology employed in this research is briefly defined alongside the data analysed. Following, the analysis is conducted, and it is argued that China's EMP constitutes an authoritarian practice that reinforces the central government and its control over minorities. The implications and relevance of this statement are then addressed. Limitations and conclusions are lastly presented, alongside suggestions for future research.

Defining Authoritarianism

Since the second half of the 20th century, scholars have been defining democratic governments as regimes characterized by necessary conditions such as free and fair elections, parties' competition, and protection of civil liberties (Milner, 2021). Consequently, authoritarian regimes have been defined as a negative category of democracy, focusing on the lack of free and fair elections and civil liberties (Glasius, 2018). Nevertheless, from the early 2000s to the mid-2010s, academics conducted extensive research to establish how authoritarian regimes differ and what triggers democratization. Definitions of distinct authoritarian governments escalated: from military, single-party, personalist (Geddes, 1999), and hybrid regimes (Schlumberger & Schedler, 2020) to illiberal democracies and competitive authoritarian regimes (Boogaards, 2009). Around the same years, due to the increasing urgency to tackle climate change, scholars also highlighted the relevance of exploring sustainability politics as an authoritarian phenomenon. Among the first advocates of the concept, Beeson (2010) introduced the dilemma exemplified by the Chinese model which questioned the legitimacy of effective sustainable governance that in turn disregards and suppressed individuals' rights.

Environmental authoritarianism¹ is defined as a "public policy model that concentrates authority in a few executive agencies manned by capable and uncorrupt elites seeking to improve environmental outcomes" (Gilley, 2012, p.288). Such a public policy dimension is dominated by a strong central entity that governs through top-down flows, limiting social actors' interventions (Beeson, 2010). As the government increasingly controls individuals' behaviors, citizens become progressively accepting of the state's regulations,

¹ Also defined as coercive state-led environmentalism or eco-authoritarianism (Li & Shapiro, 2020).

even when coercive (Li and Shapiro, 2020), resulting in diminishing individual liberties (Gilley, 2012). The acceptance of controlling and restrictive state policies by individuals derives from a shared norm among the Chinese population that generally characterizes deviant behaviors as prohibited, therefore constructing adherence to norms (especially environmentally-motivated regulations) as not only socially preferred but as necessary for the survival of humanity (Beeson, 2010).

Yet again, current studies on authoritarianism are drifting apart from definitions centered around institutions by advancing a practice-oriented approach. This paper adopts Glasius' (2018) definition of authoritarian practices, described as "patterns of action that *sabotage accountability* to people over whom a political actor exerts control [...] by means of *secrecy*, *disinformation* and *disabling voice*" (p.517). Shifting attention from structural characteristics to practices allows analyzing an actor's behaviors as distinct from institutional defining features (Glasius, 2018). In this paper, I demonstrate how policies framed as environmental and comprising environmental authoritarian governance can be executed through authoritarian practices. A complementary analytical lens between environmental authoritarianism and authoritarian practices is required to investigate such phenomena.

China's Environmental Authoritarianism

China is the largest emitter of GHG, contributing more than 20% to global emissions (Friedrich et al., 2020). The recent Climate Change Performance Index (CCPI) report positioned China at the 38th position with a low rating overall, as the country's current GHG per capita does not follow the -2°C trajectory plan as established by the Paris accord (Burck et al., 2021). At the 75th Session of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, Xi Jinping announced the country's long-term strategy, planning to reach a peak of carbon emission by 2030 and carbon neutrality by 2060 (The State Council Information Office of the PRC, 2021b). With the increment of multiple issues due to climate change and environmental

degradation such as water scarcity and pollution or land degradation and desertification, China has been attempting to tackle such concerns (Ministry of Ecology and Environment, 2021). To do so, governmental policies have been centered around the state's regulatory powers through a top-down yet fragmented approach (Gilley, 2012). Whereas governmental policymaking takes place at various national entities instituted for environmental prevention², implementation and project development occur via local governments that (presumably) create conditions and incentives for successful outputs (Gilley, 2012). Such hierarchical and centralized policy development and coordination produce rapid and effective responses to environmental threats via the mobilization of state and nonstate actors (Gilley, 2012). Nevertheless, another defining feature of China's environmental authoritarianism is the extremely limited citizens' participation, confined to obeying state policies and internalization of state-dictated knowledge (Gilley, 2012). The next paragraph dives into the case study of the Sanjiangyuan region to then explain how China employs environmental authoritarian practices.

The Sanjiangyuan Region & Ecological Migration

To mitigate the increasing degradation of the environment, large-scale conservation programs have been implemented in China since the late 2000s (Wang et al., 2010). Among these, the Sanjiangyuan (三江源) region³ of Qinghai (青海) has been recognized as one of the most essential areas for water provision (Foggin, 2008). The area includes three of the major rivers in China,⁴ which carry water to approximately 40% of the world's population (Foggin, 2008). Sanjiangyuan crosses the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR; 西藏自治区), an independent region of China. In this area, 20% of the land area eroded, and the region has been suffering from global warming and human activities (Wang et al., 2010). To restore and protect the environment of Sanjiangyuan, China established the Sanjiangyuan National Nature Reserve in 2003 (Du, 2011), and in 2020 the Sanjiangyuan National Park opened as one out of ten areas established for restoring the natural

² For instance, the State Environmental Protection Administration established in 1998 or the Ministry of Environmental Protection established in 2008. Today, the main body of the State Council for sustainability and climate change is the Ministry of Ecology and Environment, officially inaugurated in 2018 (Ministry of Ecology and Environment - The PRC, n.d.)

³ Also known as Three-River Headwater.

⁴ These are: the Yellow, the Yangtze and the Mekong rivers (Foggin, 2008).

habitat and protecting endangered species (Obermann, 2020). The so-called ecological migration (生态移民) policy⁵ planned to move residents out from the reserve of Sanjiangyuan to restore the ecosystem by 2010 (Wang et al., 2010). Of these, 90% are Tibetans (Li & Shapiro). Nevertheless, the goal date has not been achieved and the resettlement continues today (Santelli, 2021). Two explanations account for the implementation of this policy. First, herders are assumed to have a significant impact on environmental degradation due to their intensive agriculture (Foggin, 2008). As such, the government asserted that chasing the agricultural and grazing activities of the nomadic Tibetan populations by relocating them to other areas would be beneficial for grassland restoration. Second, government officials consider urbanization as advantageous for Tibetans from rural areas, as a tool for modernization and poverty alleviation (Foggin, 2008). Nevertheless, qualitative studies conducted by Du (2011, 2012) investigating the experiences of the populations involved, highlighted the challenges faced by Tibetans after their migration. Despite improved housing conditions, education, and medical care, many experienced identity crises, cultural shocks, and declining living standards (Du, 2011; Du, 2012). Adaptation to urban life resulted challenging for many due to cultural differences and language barriers, and cases of crime and alcohol abuse also increased (Du, 2012). Moreover, most of these families became dependent on state provisions, as local governments granted subsidies for the resettlement (Du, 2011; Li & Shapiro, 2020).

China often defines such programs as necessary for climate change prevention since they allow “ecological progress on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau” (The State Council Information Office of the PRC, 2021a). Nevertheless, many believe that EMPs have the goal of controlling minorities, defining them as a “technique of green coercion” (Li & Shapiro, 2020, p.102). The following part of the essay presents the methodology employed in this research, followed by the analysis of the case study through a practice-oriented approach, part of the environmental authoritarian governance of China.

Methodology

As mentioned, this paper explores Chinese environmental authoritarianism as an alternative type of governance for climate change prevention and for the implementation of sustainable policies. As such, this research aims to address and evaluate concealed authoritarian practices labelled as sustainable executed by the Chinese government in Sanjiangyuan. To do so, the methodological framework employed is qualitative case study analysis on which it is applied the theoretical lens that conceptualizes authoritarianism as a set of practices. As mentioned, the case study considered is the EMP conducted by the Chinese government and enforced on the Tibetan population in the Sanjiangyuan region. Despite the at-face-value public approval induced by active steps towards the improvement of the natural habitat and environmental in the Tibetan Plateau by the Chinese government, only few scholars have been addressing the potential concealed and ulterior motive of the Chinese government for controlling the Tibetan minority in the area (for instance, see Li & Shapiro, 2020; Du, 2011; Du, 2012). For this reason, this case was selected to shed light on this dilemma by focusing on minorities and on the impact of their resettlement on their freedom, lifestyle, and quality of life. Lastly, the analysis is conducted by scrutinizing non-governmental organizations’ reports (i.e. Human Rights Watch, 2007; International Campaign for Tibet, 2018; International Tibet Network, 2013) and the 2012 Human Rights Council (HRC)’s Special Rapporteur on the right to food. The analyzed documents contain information collected through in-field research and interviews about how the Chinese government imposed the resettlement of the targeted communities and what have been the effects and consequences endured by the Tibetan population from the region. Instances of *secrecy*, *disinformation*, and *disabling voice* were identified in the considered reports through secondary data analysis. In the next sections of the paper, the analysis is conducted followed by discussions of the findings.

Analysis: Ecological Migration in Sanjiangyuan as an Authoritarian Practice

Following the definition of authoritarian practices, this section provides instances of accountability sabotage executed by the Chinese government

⁵ Also called ecological resettlement project or biodiversity conservation (Li & Shapiro, 2020).

through *secrecy*, *disinformation*, and *disabling voice*.

Secrecy

The EMP took place without prior consultation between the Chinese government and the affected communities in the Sanjiangyuan region, to the point that Human Rights Watch (HRW) (2013) defined the policy as forcible. Furthermore, the families' resettlement was not carried out transparently, especially regarding the compensations promised to migrants (HRW, 2007). Despite Art.13 of the Chinese Constitution (1982), stating that the government will grant subsidies in the case of necessary expropriation and resettlement⁶, the provided compensation to many resettled families⁷ has been inadequate and insufficient throughout the years (HRW, 2007). The general lack of transparency throughout the whole resettlement policy negatively affected the communities, and many experienced high levels of anxiety (HRW, 2007). Government officials carried out the resettlement in a "not explicit" way, with "insufficient legal involvement" and a "lack of knowledge from all the parties" (HRW, 2007, p.56). Such an illegitimate condition of secrecy disables possibilities of the targeted individuals to influence the EMP, even to a limited extent.

Disinformation

Uncovered patterns of disinformation allow to realize that the underlying reasons of the EMP exceed the environmental objectives as promoted by the government since Beijing falsely portrays these programs as solely enacted to protect the degrading biosphere (International Campaign for Tibet, 2018). Scientists disprove the emphasis on overgrazing as a threatening activity for the area, and they attribute land degradation of the region to other causes such as climate change (HRC, 2012). Contrarily, international bodies recognize the essential role of indigenous and local communities for environmental preservation (HRC, 2012). As research showed no significant improvement of the grassland in Sanjiangyuan following the EMP (Du, 2012), environmental justifications presented in the resettlement project consist of disinformation to the Tibetan locals and the international public. Furthermore, given the country's sustained commitment to infrastructure

development in the same area, for instance mining, relocations as justified on environmental preservation constitute disinformation that continues today after almost two decades (HRW, 2007). A second instance of disinformation refers to the original assurance by Chinese officials to the resettled families that, after ten years from their relocations, they could have moved back to their pastures and original housing (HRW, 2007). Nevertheless, returning to the nomad and rural lifestyle is still illegal today, as the government expects a total integration of the families into urbanized areas (HRW, 2013). The government's goals of eradicating nomadic lifestyles are sustained through resettlement as autonomy of minorities and competing governance systems could threaten and destabilize the central power of the state (Li & Shapiro, 2020).

Disabling Voice

China imposed the EMP on individuals living in Sanjiangyuan and gave them no alternative (HRW, 2013). The non-voluntary nature of the program constitutes a breach of the civil and political rights of the affected people and does not involve the subjected targets in an essential deliberative decision-making process (International Tibet Network, 2013). Local officials communicated the arbitrary policy as non-debatable since mandated by Beijing, and there is strong evidence of the lack of "meaningful participation by affected communities in the decisions to resettle people" (HRW, 2007, p.54). This is not only a characteristic of China's EMPs, but it is part of the eco-authoritarian governance that the country employs to at the broader level (Li & Shapiro, 2020). Nevertheless, inhibiting citizens and businesses from providing insights and suggestions hurts the success of environmental policies in the long run as feedback constitutes an essential component in instituting a sustainable society (Economy, 2018). The top-down governance of China in sustainable policies and for EMPs in particular situate the state as the exclusive power holder, which ignores the concerns and expertise of local people and allows the central government to strengthen its power (International Campaign for Tibet, 2018).

⁶ Protection from expropriation

⁷ Considering that amounts of compensation greatly varied among families and different local governments' policies (HRW, 2007), it

cannot be generalized that all resettled people received the same (inadequate) compensation.

Discussion

Demonstrating how China employs authoritarian practices as a part of its environmental governance has significant societal relevance. While the government describes certain policies as necessary for preserving the environment,⁸ these support the consolidation of the regime's position by curtaining individuals' rights and controlling minorities through accountability sabotage. This is important because, despite the high levels of carbon emission, China is number one in renewable energy and clean technology industry, and many believe not only that "China has gone green" but also that authoritarianism might be an effective type of governance compared to democracies for successful environmental politics (Li & Shapiro, 2020, pp.4-5). Regarding the considered case, many believe that the National Park Project constitutes an impressive step for China, but often concerns relative to local populations are not addressed. For instance, the Sanjiangyuan National Pilot Park (2020), produced by the Paulson Institute, assesses factors of natural and cultural components. Section IX of the report (Paulson Institute, 2020) discusses the influence of the park on local communities' lifestyles. Nevertheless, it does not explain which actions were taken by local officials to respect the communities' culture without substantial change, but it just states that a positive outcome of compromises was achieved. This is an example of why it is necessary to investigate China's environmental policies and projects: the achievement of green outputs might include suppressing someone's rights and the pursuit of increasing power centralization.

Conclusion

Concluding, by displaying instances where China employed means of *secrecy*, *disinformation*, and *disabling voice*, I demonstrated how the EMP in Sanjiangyuan constitutes an authoritarian practice, which entails negative repercussions for the local minority. This highlights the need to continue investigating policies and projects labeled as sustainable through a practice-oriented approach, as these might imply the subversion of accountability and the consolidation of non-environmental goals by the central authority while disregarding local citizens. Nevertheless, this research suffers from several limitations. First, due to the country's secretive nature and linguistic barriers, official information is often challenging to retrieve and analyze. For this reason, secondary sources were used. This can often be a limitation as information can vary across outlets and can be interpreted differently. Second, the case considered is still evolving, and it is difficult to establish when the Sanjiangyuan's EMP exactly began. Therefore, information can sometimes be vaguely temporally located, leading to (partial) methodological inaccuracy. Lastly, as this paper employed the conceptualization of authoritarianism as a set of practices, future studies should investigate environmental policies of authoritarian as well as democratic countries and the impact these have on local populations. A practice-oriented approach allows to explore environmental authoritarian practices also in non-authoritarian contexts as these are not exclusive to autocratic regimes' boundaries. The continuous questioning and analysis of policies framed as environmental is necessary to ensure that the rights and liberties of minorities and local citizens continue to be respected.

A note from the author

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⁸ For instance, see Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2020.

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