

**The developmental state's approach to sustainable transition: the Chinese case**

Yifan Cai (Graduate School of Geography of Clark University, Massachusetts, USA) [ycai@clarku.edu](mailto:ycai@clarku.edu)

**Abstract:** The tension between economic and environmental imperatives in development countries has long been assumed to be greater than its counterparts in advanced economies, as sustainability is regarded as antithetical to development goals particularly in the context of late industrialization. The existing frameworks of sustainable transition, which have largely drawn upon the Western experience, have in general placed great emphasis on the role of civil society actors, highlighting more inclusive and participatory approaches. While China is rapidly emerging as one of the world's green superpowers, its path to sustainability, however, challenges conventional wisdom in its state-led and technocratic approach. To answer the question if sustainable transition can be promoted more efficiently in a developmental state, this research employs the multi-level perspective (MLP) framework and political theories to analyze the institutional configurations of sustainable transition in China. In the two case studies of wind power development and low-speed electrical vehicles (LSEV), this study analyzes the role of different governmental actors including vertical ministerial authorities and horizontal territorial authorities, and examines power dynamics and conflicts between the new and incumbent regimes. This research also looks into contextually-specific problems including 1) wind power curtailment in the case of renewable energy transition and 2) overcapacity in the electric vehicle case, and discusses their institutional underpinnings. Findings of this research show that while the Chinese developmental state, through a variety of policy instruments, has been successfully boosting production capacity to push forward green agendas, it has failed to coordinate between different state actors with conflicting interests as well as to incentivize civil society actors, which have impeded the further transition to a low carbon economy. This paper contributes to the existing research by offering an alternative paradigm of sustainable transition in the developmental state context, and the theoretical and policy implications.

Key words: socio-technical transition, green capitalism, industrial policy, fragmented authoritarianism, central-local dynamics