

Administrative Authority-driven Public Engagement: A Case Study of Local Government's Commendation Governance in China

XIAOMEI LI, LIAO LIAO & XINGYUN ZHU

Abstract In recent years, China's central government has focused strategically on motivating local governments to allocate more administrative resources to enhance performance in non-economic areas, such as environmental and cultural services. As a governance practice, the central government has initiated "evaluation and commendation" campaigns among local governments. The main governance objective of these local government campaigns is to solicit public engagement, including public participation, support, and actions. Based on a case study of the campaign to establish a National Civilised City, this paper presents the local government's governance logic, operating mechanism, and governance performance in soliciting public engagement in "evaluation and commendation" activities. We find that in "evaluation and commendation" campaigns, characterised by short-term authority commendation incentives and shortage of governance resources, the local governments adopted the unusual governance mechanism of "administrative authority-driven public engagement", using both flexible and mandatory strategies. The flexibility strategy leads to the active participation of citizens, but the mandatory strategy makes public engagement stay at the superficial level, characterised by surface-level cooperation and inner rejection, causing partial exclusion and separation between the government and the public, in turn exhibiting a "ratchet effect" in governance performance.

Keywords: • public engagement, China local government • evaluation and commendation • engagement mechanism • governance performance

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1 Introduction

After decades of economic development, the unbalanced development of local economies and public service has become increasingly prominent in China (Fu & Zhang, 2007). The government's focus has moved from economic functions to balancing a multi-objective task system¹ (Huang & Zhou, 2019). Motivating local governments to devote more administrative resources to non-economic areas, such as environmental and cultural services, has become China's central government's strategic focus. In 2021, the central government spent RMB 347.9 billion on purchasing public services, an average annual increase of 13.6% since 2015, which effectively contributes to the improvement of the quality and efficiency of public services². Central government departments increasingly influence governance performance by designing and encouraging local governments to compete for awards based on specific assessment indicators, such as the "competition for commendation from upper-level government" activity.

China is a unitary state. In the context of the leadership of the Communist Party of China, the main characteristic of relationship between the national and local governments is centralisation of power, with local governments taking full advantage of their initiative. In this context, the higher level of government creates strong incentives and constraints on the lower level of government within its authority. For local governments, they need to follow the instructions of the higher government as well as obey the leadership of the Party Committee. The higher levels of government hold the power of personnel and competition is formed among the local governments in order to gain the promotion. The competition has the following characteristics. First, the correlation effect between where the competition activities are launched and economic development is weakened. Competition activities can divert local government's focus from economic development by guiding local governance preferences. It therefore significantly differs from the "political tournament" model, in which local officials' attention revolves around GDP development (Zhou, 2007; Joanna, 2014). Besides, the competition activities are characterised by multiple, cross-hierarchy rounds in which upper-level governments set lower-level governments' performance criteria (Wang, 2018) and decide whether local officials receive rewards or promotions. This motivates local governments to act as competing enterprises (Andrew, 1994) and form a leadership or special group to create higher-level promotions. Third, although the commendation competition's rules are set in a top-down manner in China's hierarchical system, the organizational collaboration and policy implementation required for competition activities depend on the public's participation, support, and actions. Moreover, the public's subjective perception of the local government's performance occupies an important place in the government's National Civilised City evaluation index system. Therefore, a prominent organizational logic for local governments is to mobilise the public to participate in the competition. At a certain point, local governments' special tasks

sectors are tasked with fostering public engagement, and local governments' main task becomes motivating the whole society's participation.

In democratic political debates, public engagement can be a potent means of achieving key democratic values, such as legitimacy, justice, and effectiveness in governance (Archon, 2015). Voluntary organizations, interest groups, and associations can often improve governance performance through their interactions with governments (Putnam, 1993; Boix & Posner, 1998; Edwards & Foley, 1998). In the context of China, the state plays an authoritarian government role, exercising strong organizational control of society through state power (Walder, 1986) and integrating people into its various organizational networks through various formal organizations (Dickson, 2003; 2007). Meanwhile, to achieve governance goals and promote policy implementation, local governments use top-down administrative controls and carry out strategic public mobilization through incentives, penalties, publicity, and demonstration (Perry, 2002; Yu, 2010; Xun, 2007; Tan, 2014; Wang, 2018), commonly known as social mobilization (Deutsch, 1961; Rogers, Coldstein, & Fox, 2018). The Chinese government's most recent social governance strategy has been to encourage bottom-up public/citizen engagement (Jing & Gong, 2012; Xie, 2015; Tang, 2017; Yang, 2017). To that end, civic engagement (mainly by nonprofit organizations) in public service delivery has been increased and supported by local governments in China (Jing, 2008; Jing & Savas, 2009).

However, there is greater local government mobilization of public participation in "evaluation and commendation" governance than interactions between governments and nonprofit organizations in social governance. This mobilization is significantly different from the social mobilization of mass politics, serving as an irregular governance mechanism for local governments to mobilise social resources to achieve their governance goals in response to such governance dilemmas as the difficulty in accessing governance resources and the lack of horizontal coordination between government bureaucratic systems in the post-unit (Post-Danwei system) period.

"Evaluation and commendation" is an important form of incentive and assessment for local governments in the context of political tournaments, which provides an important perspective for explaining the behavioural logic of local governments. However, current research has mainly focused on the government's coping strategies phenomenon, and less on the interaction between the government and the public in "evaluation and commendation" governance. Research on this topic provides positive and negative experiences for the government to integrate social forces, which is conducive to improving governance performance. Given the above, this paper focuses on "evaluation and commendation" governance. First, what is local government's governance logic in actively integrating social forces (public engagement)? Second, how does local government realise public "organizational

mobilization,” and what are its governance and operational mechanisms? Third, what characterises its governance performance?

In this article, we deconstruct the interactive process between the government and the public in competition for commendation from upper-level government. Local governments' first objective is to focus government, market, social, and third-party attention and governance resources on the main task—evaluation and commendation governance—to reconstruct the organizational carrier and governance mechanism, transform government intentions into social motivation, and guide public participation. This governance mechanism's fundamental features are the centralization of administrative power, the shaping of public opinion, the mobilization of public participation, and the reconstruction of organizational operations by creating activities to elicit upper-level government commendation. As such, this paper first combines the diachronic evolution of local governments' governance logic, then details a case concerning a local government's competition for the National Civilised City commendation to depict how it integrated public participation. The case study informs our discussions of and conclusions regarding the governance performance of this model of public engagement in C.

2 Literature review – from political tournaments to commendation governance: change and persistence of local governance logic

Since the country's 1978 reform and opening up, the nature of national governance in China has evolved from the exercise of dominant power to a pattern of technological governance (Qu, Zhou, & Ying, 2009). Political system reforms, characterised by promoting top-down structures and piloting policy initiatives before implementing them nationally, have shaped the interactions between state and society and directly impacted the allocation of power and responsibility between central and local governments (He, 2020). Driven by system reform, different types of governance models have emerged at the local level, resulting in local government being seen as a “manufacturer” (Walder, 1994), “local development” agent (Zhang, 2014), and “public welfare operator” (Chen, 2018) shaped by specific institutional mechanisms.

2.1 Evolution of local governance models

Different from the doctrine of “characteristic federalism” (Montinola, Qian, & Weingast, 1996; Jin, Qian, & Weingast, 2005), Promotion Tournament Theory (Zhou, 2007) interprets China's rapid economic growth through the lens of government officials' internal incentive logic. The theory emphasises that the technical premise of superiors' collection and concentration of personnel rights, the formulation of clear assessment indicators, and the comparability of officials' performance in different jurisdictions provide governance incentives for local officials; however, they also have negative effects, such as incentive distortion and

repeated construction. Although the academic community's understanding of the logic of official promotion and economic development is controversial³, Promotion Tournament Theory discriminates between the organizational elements driving effective local governance from an intergovernmental relations perspective that fits multi-level principal-agent organizational situations.

For local officials, maintaining economic growth and social stability was once "the sword of Damocles" (Wang, 2015). Tenure and career promotion are two important objective functions influencing local officials' action preferences. Since entering the new stage of national governance, the national political system's discourse expression changed from a singular focus on economic development to the construction of a pluralistic governance system, highlighting a new "five-in-one" development pattern. Therefore, in addition to being expected to show governance performance in economics, officials have been encouraged to act effectively in non-economic fields.

To that end, the "evaluation and commendation governance model" has been widely implemented (Li, 2014), resulting in the dual assessment mechanism's simultaneous operation in economic and non-economic fields, while local governments still often promise promotions to ensure officials' effective performance in commendation governance. Thus, the evolution of the dual governance model reflects the advanced turn of local governance logic. What are the similarities and differences between the models?

2.2 Change and persistence of governance logic

The promotion tournament and commendation governance mode classifications help clarify the differences between promotion and recognition as governance models. First, their governance areas are different; the promotion tournament mode emphasises performance in the economic field, while the commendation governance ranks performance in non-economic fields. Second, the two mode's incentive intensities for the main body of governance are different. In the promotion tournament, incentives mainly focus on local governments' "top leaders" (the mayor and Communist Party secretary), while the commendation governance mode has a wider range of incentives aimed at executive officials departments, industry, and even public participants.

Third, the two modes' assessment forms differ. The promotion tournament mode measures economic performance based on statistical tables formed in a specific period using endogenous indicators (Wang, 2018). The commendation governance mode is based on the effects of governance in non-economic areas in a specific period; the evaluation procedure combines explicit and secret visits, introduces the "one-vote veto," and features an evaluation index with multi-dimensional attributes. For example, evaluating the effect of establishing a National Civilised City involves

real-scene simulation verification, field investigations, and field observation. If a city has a major safety accident or environmental pollution event before the declaration period, the "one-vote veto" ends its participation in the evaluation qualification.

Finally, the two modes require different mobilization strategies. The promotion tournament mode is accomplished mostly by decomposing the government's internal objective management responsibility (Wang & Wang, 2009) and the layer-by-index-layer compaction of economic development responsibility. The commendation governance mode must fully absorb the above strategies to mobilize public engagement, a critical establishment process if local governments are to achieve priority recognition in a given area.

At the same time, the two modes have common features. First, in both promotion tournament and commendation governance, higher government departments exercise strong authority and effectively guide lower government's governance orientation; leadership attention and high promotion are deeply reflected in the dual governance picture. Second, there is no difference in the incentive means by which the two modes foster department-to-department motivation and local-to-local competition. Both models comprehensively use index measurement and other technical management means to set the assessment index system, rank governance performance, and apply the appraisal results to the cadre promotion incentive mechanism. Finally, in both models, local governments' positive actions can positively affect the social environment. Promotion tournament governance efforts can help to improve the local business environment and stimulate market investment demand, while commendation governance can increase the visibility of regional public opinion and bring positive economic development benefits through the acquisition and prominent display of "healthy city" or "civilised city" signage. The similarities and differences between the two modes are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Comparison of the similarities and differences between the promotion model and the commendation model

	Promotion model	Commendation model
Governance area	Economic development affairs area	Non-economic areas such as establishing civilised cities
Governance incentives	Emphasis on encouraging “top leaders” of leading officials	Incentive by the Chief Executive, sector or industry
Governance mechanisms	Objective Management Responsibility Decomposition	Mission centric, full mobilization of public participation
Assessment system	Statistical tables of economic dimensions	Multi-dimensional assessment index system, the introduction of “one-vote veto,” real scene simulation verification assessment mechanism
Governance performance	Economic performance	Professional performance and social performance
Common characteristics	(1) The authority and effectiveness of higher-level governments are strengthened, and leaders attach importance to and promote governance at high levels; (2) Setting assessment index and using relative ranking method to identify governance effect; (3) The governance effect has a significant positive effect on improving the social environment of the district.	

Source: Edited by author.

In fact, making local governments in competition environment by the central government is not a unique policy to China. The United Kingdom is also a unitary country, and the development of local government performance management system in the UK is a reflection of such a relationship between central and local governments. Although decentralization is adopted, local government performance management reflects the coexistence of top-level design and local innovation. During the Conservative Party's reign, the *Local Government Finance At 1982* was introduced, and Audit Commission Authorities and the National Health Service in England and Wales was established to audit and compare public expenditure across England and Wales. Local governments at all levels must strictly comply with the regulations of the UK Audit Committee in the collection and processing of performance information, ensuring that the central government maintains a high level of monitoring power(Bao & Zhou, 2010). In the mid-1990s, with the proposal of “best value”, the Labour Party emphasized the need to empower local governments with greater autonomy in public services, placing them in a position where they must compete to win “customers’ recognition”, encouraging local governments to develop more efficient performance management systems(Bovaird,

2008). Under different central-local relationships, three local government performance management models have been formed: central leadership in England, transition from central responsibility to local autonomy in Wales, and local autonomy in Scotland. In this process, extensive participation from semi-official organizations, professional organizations, and the public was further incorporated (Yang & Xing, 2020). Although there is no promotion incentive compared to China, it also enhances the autonomy of local governments and promotes the transformation of local government governance concepts.

2.3 Commendation governance of public engagement: mobilised participation dominated by administrative authority

The governance logic informing evaluation and commendation is to guide local governments to improve the quality of their social governance by seeking commendation from upper-level government (Wen, 2018). Commendation governance activities require involving the public in formulating evaluation rules and contents. In practice, the government system seeks an effective way to mobilise the public to participate in the governance process through strong appeals by leaders and authorities and actions by the administrative hierarchy.

For example, the evaluation criteria for civilised city establishment activities are multi-dimensional, including city appearance, citizen consciousness, traffic order, and educational enrollment rates⁴. The evaluation index is related to the “cross zones” and “supervision blind areas” of different departments’ responsibilities. The evaluation performance identification and evaluation preparation processes rely greatly on the public’s behavioural orientation in the urban space. As such, this activity involves the local Party committee and government “top leaders” acting to embed or mobilise work and stresses the urgency and importance of public opinion in the government hierarchy (Cheng & He, 2021).

On the other hand, by promoting projects whose practical operation will be supported by resources from different governmental sectors, local governments can open new arenas outside the regular government hierarchy and provide organizational support for the creation of activities to enhance social mobilization effectiveness (Ye & Zhou, 2019).

Among the various types of evaluation and commendation projects, the establishment of a National Civilised City has become a piece of “sweet pastry” to which local governments attach great importance, due to the strict application conditions, comprehensive evaluation index, scarcity of recognition honour, etc⁵. Establishing a civilised city can show the local government’s organizational logic and practical characteristics in evaluating and commending governance activities and deeply discuss interactive governance’s substantive influence on the “government bureaucracy-public.” This paper, taking the establishment of a

National Civilised City in S City of Q Province as an example, depicts the operation of “government bureaucracy-public” interactive governance at the local level and analyses its practical logic.

3 Research

3.1 The case study of S City

This research is to analyze local government's governance logic and operating mechanism in soliciting public engagement in “evaluation and commendation” activities, consequently a method that can explain the process and story in detail and depth is required. The research questions of case studies are often ‘how’ and ‘why’. One of significant features of case studies is that the whole study is completely focused on a single topic and a single case, which is the fundamental difference between case studies and other research methods. In addition, case studies are always in-depth, detailed, descriptive to achieve the most detailed knowledge and understanding of a particular case, especially to undermine some underlying mechanism by describing a story with contradictions and conflicts (Robert, 1994). Case study provides an important instrument for us to excavate the mechanism under the topic of the public participation in evaluation and commendation governance. The research cases were selected from S City, a prefecture-level city in Q Province in western China. S City is famous for its ecotourism and green economy. With more than 120 scenic spots, such as Three-su Temple and Hei Long Tan, and flourished ecological industries, such as bamboo weaving industry and vine pepper industry, S City was rated as China's most beautiful ecological and cultural tourism city and national forest city. Beginning in 2017, S City gradually started its “strive to win National Civilised City” governance track. In researching the establishment of National Civilised Cities as a governance issue, the author conducted participant observation and unstructured interviews in S City from March to May 2017, July to September 2017, and January to March 2018, obtaining rich primary and secondary data.

Local governments wishing to create a “National Civilised City” must first be selected from a list of nominees approved by the Central Commission for Civilisation, and then launch a three-year-long project of creation activities. Three prefecture-level cities in Q Province were selected as potential national civilised cities in 2015, with the final stage of building a National Civilised City expected to begin in 2017. During the field investigation, S City's Municipal Party Committee and government undertook high-level promotion to firmly grasp the establishment work, while paying close attention to resource allocation, the integration of institutional resources in the operation process, public participation (such as volunteer teams), and other forms of preparation for the establishment work. Establishing a National Civilised City was incorporated into the 13th Five-Year Plan's local economic and social development plan; S City's Fourth Party Congress

included it in its report, setting up a headquarters under its Municipal Party Committee Secretary and formulating a series of establishment plans. On April 19, 2017, a conference to mobilise the final 100 days of National Civilised City activities ("100 Days Storm Action"), involving S City's official government congress. S City's Municipal Party Committee Secretary announced at the meeting:

Establishing a National Civilised City is a major political task entrusted to S City by the provincial Party committee and provincial government, and a glorious mission. All departments and government official at all levels of S City should immediately carry out the "100 days Storm Action" to establish a National Civilised City throughout the country, with the confidence and determination that we have, we should strive against the time, overcome all difficulties, unite together and work hard, and make every effort to test Party spirit, style and ability with the results of establishment (research materials, interview record : 20170419).

A prominent feature of this announcement was its characterization of establishment activities as "major political tasks" in S City's Party committees and government work arrangements. This kind of "high leadership authority promotion" can be highly valued by local departments because it provides the joint support of political responsibility compaction and ritual mobilization. S City's municipal governance process had the following characteristics:

First, the Party and government head was nominated as "commander-in-chief" (someone who lead the establishment of civilized cities and take overall political responsibility for it), indicating the establishment of a high-level command structure. A Civil City Command was set up to coordinate the work, with heads of different functional departments being integrated into the organizational framework.

Second, a management system was implemented, comprising S City's Party and government leadership, with the "area leader" responsible for its detailed management, compaction of functional departments, and division of responsibilities. In this system, each of S City's departments was assigned a different responsibility area and, based on the "he who is in charge, is responsible" principle, developed performance benchmarks, taking the "Friday comprehensive centralised action day" as the key activity. All street-level organizations performed comprehensive rectification at least once a week to control the city's management issues.

Third, functional departments participated in joint enforcement efforts to crack down on uncivilised behaviour. For example, several enforcement departments, such as the Traffic Police Bureau, the Bureau of Industry and Information Technology, the Environmental Protection Bureau, and the Market Supervision

Bureau, were continuously linked into a “combination boxing” to control uncivilised urban behaviours. Following the management principle of “reminder first, warning second, punishment third,” law enforcement bureaus carried out field investigations into all kinds of illegal operations and traffic behaviours, using street-by-street investigation and clues provided by the masses.

The above characteristics highlight the importance S City's Party committee and government placed on establishing the National Civilised City organization system. Due to time limits, S City's Party committee and government had to fully integrate all institutional resources, construct the organization⁶ hierarchy, and strengthen the “same frequency resonance” effect of compacting and establishing responsibility by creating a unified sense of “establishment responsibility” and functional departments' joint enforcement, in turn stimulating the participation of multiple societal actors and reduced or restrained uncivilised phenomena. This suggests that to establish a National Civilised City, local government must embed its high-level-promoted governance model in everyday public life. At the same time, we may infer that if local government's civilised city activity performance meets with Central Commission of Civilisation approval, its governance performance has, to some extent, been “received” by the local public. Therefore, observing the government and public relations formed in establishing National Civilised City organizations can facilitate our understanding of the operational logic motivating public participation in local governance in China.

3.2 Mobilization of social forces by the governmental level

On 19 April 2017, S City's government officials held a mobilization conference for the “100 Days Storm Action” to establish a National Civilised City. At the meeting, S City's leaders demanded that “all departments at all levels and government officials at all levels should immediately carry out the creation activities of the ‘100 days Storm Action’,” highlighting the urgency and importance of local departments' cooperation with municipal Party committees and governments to establish National Civilised Cities.

This requirement was based on stringent performance accountability and realised the ties between establishment responsibility and departmental interests. S City's “area leader responsibility system” is a typical embodiment of how bureaucratic governance power continues to output all layer-to-layer pressures.

S City's municipal Party committee and government gave municipal officials initial responsibility for implementing and managing the city's “area leader responsibility system.” Its management was divided among the streets and sections of S City's dozens of districts, with Party committee, government, and functional department officials acting as “area leaders” who, together with their “area units,” were responsible for improving the social environment in their area. In each

responsibility area, the “area leader” and working group refined specific establishment work measures, delimited parking areas for motor and non-motor vehicles, and preached to and informed merchants – standardizing street merchants’ advertising, urging shops to post the five responsibilities on their front door, and creating a good atmosphere for a civilised city. The “area leader responsibility system” realised two-way interaction with the public in the form of municipal leaders’ supervision and inspection and formed the operational pattern for “area leader units” and merchants:

P area leader unit, all staff, and S City one street lane 63 merchants formed pairs. In each pair, the unit staff would contact two to three merchants. Through the leading group, members took turns on duty all the time, issued civil information contact cards, and used other ways to create a civilised demonstration street. In practical actions, the area leader would organise unit staff and workers to clean the street surface, clean dirty facades, and remove small advertisements that have infected the shops; most shopkeepers started consciously cleaning their facades as well (interview record:20181228, staff of S City P Area Leader Unit).

A “twinning” approach effectively integrates “informal relations,” “human feelings,” and other cultural resources arising from the ethics of daily life (Zhou, 2016) and realises the compatibility of strict establishment requirements implementation and flexible enforcement via persuasion. The effective implementation of the “area leader responsibility system” also benefited from the “area leader” having substantive authority to improve the sanitary environment. Classical organization theory research (Aghion& Tirole, 1997) distinguishes between an organization’s management’s substantive and formal authorities, noting the two may have different attributes in practice. Although the formal authority for establishing a National Civilised City belongs to local Party committees and government departments, implementing the “area leader responsibility system” largely strengthened the public’s (particularly merchants’) internal obedience to the government leadership’s substantive authority, with most businesses believing it was “necessary to cooperate with leaders to establish a National Civilised City” and that “civilisation begins with me.”

3.3 Flexible strategies to guide public participation

During S City’s establishment of a National Civilised City, the government compacted responsibility through its “area leader responsibility system,” leveraged the public’s enthusiasm to participate, and realised the extension and spread of government departments’ synergistic effect into the social field. Governance with government-led characteristics, after all, needs to solve the proactive problem of “how can mobilization be possible.” S City’s Party committees, government departments (including its federation of trade unions), and communities provided more than 1,000 volunteers who became the organizational basis for effective social

mobilization for establishing National Civilised Cities On May 16, 2017, during a ceremony launching the “100 Days Storm Action,” S City’s mayor (and civilised city headquarters commander) called on more than 1000 volunteers to establish a National Civilised City, vowing it would be a decisive battle featuring quick action and climaxing in a National Civilised City’s establishment.

Firstly, vigorous advocate. The task breakdown table formulated by S city emphasizes the importance of conducting questionnaire publicity, innovating publicity methods, grasping key groups, and conducting household promotion and centralized promotion. At the same time, further making good use of various LED electronic displays, outdoor screens, bulletin boards, windows and other carriers and platforms such as microblogs, WeChat public numbers and TikTok, etc. of various authorities, to regularly publish knowledge of *Chuangwen* (establishment of a National Civilised City), widely pushing information of epidemic prevention and control, civilised and healthy lifestyles and other key contents to create a strong atmosphere for *Chuangwen*. On the one hand, this strengthens the public's understanding and support for the work of *Chuangwen* and facilitates public cooperation. On the other hand, the questionnaire publicity is also used as an important means to collect feedback from the public, assessing the progress of the existing work of *Chuangwen* through the public's feedback.

Secondly, guide of the public opinion. S city has conducted in-depth research and reports on advanced models emerging from the construction of spiritual civilisation, the prevention and control of epidemics and the fight against poverty. In newspapers, television and radio, a special section entitled “Talking about *Chuangwen*” was opened, inviting party and government leaders, cadres and workers, front-line workers, citizens, foreign businessmen and other people from all walks of life to talk about changes, feelings and suggestions. The government not only did publicity work by itself, but also handed over the microphone to the public, letting them speak and guiding them to form a positive and enthusiastic atmosphere of public opinion.

Thirdly, organizational mobilization. S city has formed teams of volunteers or made use of existing mass cultural and sports organizations in the area to carry out voluntary activities. S City’s municipal Party committees and government departments selected civil servants to participate (as volunteers) in comprehensive urban renovation work and created a civilised community atmosphere through the street-level involvement of Party members and volunteer forces in civilisation lectures and other actions. Some Party members represented industrial and commercial enterprises that also sent volunteer teams. Volunteers from government departments, community Party committees, and industrial and commercial enterprises—all wearing red armbands and “little yellow hats” and acting under the multiple mobilization of “area leaders” and community Party committees—became a leading force in S City’s civilised city creation, whether by helping traffic police

maintain order at busy intersections or working at regulation booth management displays in farmers' markets.

3.4 Mandatory strategies to promote public participation

In the social mobilization process, the function of flexible strategy is mainly to orient "guiding norms," as it is difficult to fundamentally reduce the probability of negative behaviour. For persistent uncivilised phenomena, the more effective mobilization of mandatory strategy is to constrain uncivilised behaviour externally by placing it under the supervision and control of public opinion. This has led to significant changes in mobilization strategies' fundamental attributes, with flexible strategies emphasizing positive civilisation implications. Emphasizing or strengthening civilisation's positive functions implies calling for public stigmatization of uncivilised behaviour, leading to a rigid, negative strategy. Compared with the flexible guidance strategy, the mandatory strategy emphasises inhibiting and controlling negative behaviour, whether through traffic police conducting more illegal parking inspections, urban construction departments strengthening their renovation efforts, or new information media arising.

Maintaining urban traffic order is a key problem when establishing a National Civilised City⁷. Flexible, persuasion-oriented order maintenance is difficult to attain through "little yellow hats" alone. The practical logic for using a hard strategy to "suppress control" is to "expose uncivilised behaviour in the spotlight of public opinion." Since July 2017, S City has relied on the city's Party committee propaganda department to use new media platforms like WeChat⁸ and Weibo⁹ to expose daily "uncivilised traffic phenomena" by revealing the owners of and license plate information for illegally parked vehicles. S City is a society of acquaintances and, as one private car owner commented, "it is better to dig a tunnel to hide your shame if you have your car on this WeChat publication" (interview record:20170719). The new media "exposure platform" encouraged the public to expose each other's uncivilised behaviour by providing an "active reward" incentive. The following argument, taken from the new media, concerns setting rules to motivate the public to expose uncivilised behaviour positively:

Encourage the general resident to participate actively to control the surrounding uncivilised behaviour. Everybody can use a mobile phone or a camera to take pictures, indicating the exposure reason, time, and place (more than three pictures, if using a mobile phone, please use a horizontal row). You can send the photo electronically to the creative office mailbox (XXXXXX @163. com). After examining the manuscript, we will publish them on the S City television station and the China S City net official WeChat exposure station. Once the report information is adopted, we will pay you for the report (research material:20170803, S city).

After October 2017, as the time for assessment and acceptance approached, management of the “area leader responsibility system” became increasingly frequent, and various functional departments strengthened their comprehensive improvements to traffic, the urban environment, and other areas. “The little yellow hats” were busy in the streets and the community, promoting basic knowledge about the establishment of National Civilised Cities by introducing manuals like the 100 Questions for the Creation of Civilised Cities. At this stage, all local government governance showed the conventional characteristics of campaign-style governance (Ni & Yuan, 2014). Traffic patrol police, urban management teams, and other grass-roots bureaucrats were particularly enhanced. All local government official groups strove to guarantee the establishment of a National Civilised City through regular traffic patrols and the “area leader responsibility system,” while some members of the public still found these actions “difficult to understand”:

The traffic investigation section is too strict; if you park randomly once, the traffic police will take photos. There was no possibility of playing cat and mouse with the traffic police during the establishment period. The punishment was slight and bad luck was published on TV. The passenger station and farmers market were high illegal incidence areas. In the past, stopping at the passenger station to pick up people would not be photographed; now, if people leave the car, whether for five minutes or half an hour, or if the car is parked outside the parking line, the punishment ticket will be on the car window. There is no room for debate in the opinion of law enforcement, but I think there is a strong relationship between parking randomly and the shortage of parking space resources in these areas. It's reasonable to penalise violations, but urban parking space resources are still too tight (interview data:20171011, Y master of taxi company in S city).

On November 14, 2017, the China Civilisation Network announced its fifth list of National Civilised Cities on its official WeChat platform; S City was not listed. Later, articles emerged on popular WeChat pages with headlines like “Failure is not the end; S City's *Chuangwen* is still on the way!” and “Why did S City lose the National Civilised City?” At the same time, during the author's visit, many civil servants in S City reported having mixed and complex feelings about the “5+2” hard work they had done to establish a National Civilised City in S City over the 100 days of activity. By November 2017, S City seemed to have returned to its former serenity, without busy “little yellow hats” and “area leader” schedules. However, in October 2018, S City again put *Chuangwen* preparations on its agenda, launching its “Bi-monthly Action” for the sixth National Civilised City competition.

The positive effect of this strategy lies in its ability to strengthen public awareness of rights, which helps quickly and effectively stop stubborn uncivilized behavior and mobilize larger public participation. For the government, it also facilitates the improvement of cooperation and communication with the public and the further

integration of the administration within the society, enhancing the concept of people-centredness in China. On the other hand, the negative side is that the mandatory strategies has raised concerns about personal privacy security. Besides, some of the stigmatising practices damage the public's reputation, creating a psychology of rejection and the uncooperative behaviour. At the same time, the government's support for the power of public opinion has encouraged the malicious misuse of reporting and exposure by the public, undermining civic character.

4 Conclusions and discussions

Unlike the political tournament organised by local governments around economic indicators, the organizational logic informing commendation governance activities guides local governments to shape people-centred governance and improve the quality of social governance in their districts. "Commendation governance" activities require public engagement in their organization and rules selection.

This article has detailed the governance process followed to establish a National Civilised City in S city. In the "post-unit system" period, in which government power's overall effect has been attenuated, the "administrative authority for mobilizing public engagement" governance paradigm provides an organizational chain for two-way interaction between the government and the public. Moreover, its value of "multiple subjects co-participating in the governance process" conforms to modern social governance's technical feasibility and value rationality requirements. The paradigm can effectively connect the government's governance objectives with the public's engagement demands to form a symbiosis between government authority and social autonomy. The theoretical connotation of this governance paradigm does not involve the judgment of value choice; however, it may be challenged in practice because of the complexity of governance situations.

Many studies on the commendation governance process for establishing civilised and healthy cities have demonstrated the negative effects of local governance's campaign-style governance attributes and the short-term effects of behaviour orientation on governance performance. In particular, the community Party committee and volunteer organizations are the bearing entities of flexible strategy application, manifested as "persuasion," "education," and "leadership." A flexible strategy aims to shape a tacit social consensus and guide the public to generate a behavioural inertia that conforms to the connotation of civilisation.

However, it is difficult to remove the "hard nail" approach to opponents of civilisation from this model. Thus, the hard strategy has become a "specially customised" treatment measure. During the mobilization period of S City's National Civilised City organization establishment, the "hard strategy" relied heavily on exposing uncivilised behaviour, which not only shaped negative public worries about "overexposing personal information" but also created the "suppress negative

effect” by creating an atmosphere of mutual supervision and disclosure through remuneration incentives. The practical significance of this hard strategy itself is that it integrated the government into organizational fields in both soft and hard ways (ranging from a looser internal structure, to the alienation of interests, to outright confrontation) that were completely divorced from the overall goal of “establishing a National Civilised City to be evaluated and commended.” Some members of the public had difficulty recognizing the legitimacy and value rationality of this kind of governance mobilization, which formed “public mobilised participation” with “mobilised cooperation and inner exclusion,” resulting in partial exclusion and even separation between the government and the public, with governance performance having a “ratchet effect.” This research studies the process and mechanism of government mobilization of public participation in “evaluation and commendation” activities, providing a new perspective and inspiration for government and public relations research in the context of political tournaments. The Chinese case suggests that “high leadership authority promotion” is a premise, and flexible strategies are the key to engage the public. The use of mandatory strategies sometimes leads to higher efficiency, while the excessive use and misuse of them can actually have negative effects. In fact, not only in China, but also in other countries the governments have rich experience in mobilizing public participation. For example, in UK’s environmental governance, citizens are not only endowed the right to environmental information, decision-making rights in environmental affairs, and litigation rights in the law process, but also engaged in environmental assessment projects. Although this research is only about the experience of a Chinese city’s “evaluation and commendation” campaigns, the implications for government mobilization of public participation in other countries and cities are universal: “administration-driven public participation” should focus on stimulating the positive aspects of civic character by using flexible strategies, and it is also of great significance that government officials act in person to provide the examples as participants. However, the limitations of this study lie in the lack of understanding of the micro psychology and cognition of the people involved, thus failing to comprehensively evaluate the government’s mobilization of public participation from the perspective of the public’s perspective. With the rise of behavioral public management, individual micro attitudes play an increasingly important role in examining government policies and behaviors. Therefore, in the future, investigations targeting the public can continue to be conducted.

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Notes:

¹ Task system includes different projects with a detailed list of the projects' competition instructions and evaluations.

² Data source: 2021 China Statistical Yearbook.
<http://www.stats.gov.cn/sj/ndsj/2021/indexch.htm>

³ The positive effect of promotion incentives on economic development is supported by evidence at the prefectural and provincial levels (Li Shu et al., 2017; Wang Xianbin et al., 2010). However, some studies question the incentive model directly linked to political promotion and economic indicators. Using data from 16 sub-provincial cities from 1982-2011, Mei Zhiqi (2018) and others found that "the relationship between mayor's economic performance and promotion in 1982-2011 showed no significant positive correlation, To a significant positive correlation, To a less significant negative correlation trend."

⁴ Source : the National Civilized City Evaluation System.
<https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1700989207571211237&wfr=spider&for=pc>

⁵ Establishing a National Civilized City in China has gradually developed into the mass activities of building country's spiritual civilization since the 1980s. Since 1995, the Party Central Committee has advocated civilized cities, civilized villages and towns, and civilized industries, which are known as the three "mass spiritual civilization building activities". Generally speaking, the central government promotes this type of activities, which is characterized by high authoritative support and competition at the same level. The winner of the activities can obtain financial support and increase political capital.

⁶ For example, the member units of the establishment of the civilized city headquarters are composed of the strip departments in the horizontal dimension; in the vertical dimension, not only the city level has established the establishment of the civilized city headquarters, but also the county level has set up the creation headquarters.

⁷ Urban traffic order occupies an important weight in the process of establishing a National Civilized City, and the field evaluation of "pedestrians and their vehicles abide by traffic rules" is mostly anonymous in the form of mysterious identity play, squat observation and so on, which makes it difficult for local governments to carry out coping strategies. This also avoids speculative behavior in the process of establishing National Civilized Cities to some extent, thus highlighting the important component of establishing National Civilized Cities.

⁸ WeChat is considered as Chinese version of WhatsApp in China which almost all Chinese use in everyday life.

⁹ Weibo is considered as Chinese version of Facebook in China which around half of Chinese use every day.

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