PERFORMATIVE GOVERNANCE

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ABSTRACT

The state often struggles to meet citizens' demands but confronts strong public pressure to do so. What does the state do when public expectations exceed its actual governing capacity? This article shows that the state can respond by engaging in performative governance—the theatrical deployment of language, symbols, and gestures to foster an impression of good governance among citizens. Performative governance should be distinguished from other types of state behavior, such as inertia, paternalism, and the substantive satisfaction of citizens' demands. The author illustrates this concept in the realm of environmental governance in China. Given the severity of China's environmental pollution, the resulting public outcry, and the logistical and political challenges involved in solving the problem, how can the state redeem itself? Ethnographic evidence from participant observation at a municipal environmental protection bureau reveals that when bureaucrats are confronted with the dual burdens of low state capacity and high public scrutiny, they engage in performative governance to assuage citizens' complaints. This study draws attention to the double meaning of "performance" in political contexts, and the essential distinction between the substantive and the theatrical.

WORDS like "performance," "actor," and "role" are laced with double meanings in the English language—one theatrical, the other substantive. But when these terms are used in political contexts today, their theatrical connotations disappear. A government's "performance" means the quality of its public service, measured by objective standards like GDP growth obtained, dollar amounts distributed, number of individuals covered, or exactness of regulations enforced. A "role" means a function, while a political "actor" simply means someone in politics.

Meanwhile, a lasting wealth of literature betrays the ubiquity of theatrical performance in politics as well as its intimate connection to political power. Politicians use carefully choreographed oratory to generate electoral support.[1] The powerless can "act as if" they are in compliance to evade, resist, or even subvert the powerful.[2] Protesters use dramatic performances to legitimize their demands to authorities.[3] Rulers, in turn, orchestrate extravagant spectacles of political harmony to uphold their realm.[4]

[1] Alexander 2010; Green 2009.
[2] Havel 1985; Scott 1987; Scott 1990; Wedeen 1998.
[3] Perry 2018; Esherick and Wasserstrom 1990; Alexander 2017.
[4] Geertz 1980; Loveman 2005; Roberts 2012; Wedeen 2015; Reed 2019.

World Politics 1–32
doi: 10.1017/S0043887120000131

Despite this rich literature emphasizing the importance of visual, verbal, and gestural symbols in politics,[5] at least two gaps remain. First, although ample theory about theatrical performances by political leaders and ordinary citizens exists, the bureaucratic apparatus of the state itself remains underexamined as a theatrical actor. A bureaucracy, with its rigid codes, preordained mission, hierarchical command, clear division of labor, and predictable patterns of promotion and dismissal, subdues each member into "a single cog in an ever-moving mechanism that prescribes to him an essentially fixed route of march."[6] Max Weber distinguishes such "rational-legal" bureaucratic authority from the "charismatic authority" of political grandstanders, whose theatrical performances, from Cicero to Barack Obama, have been well examined.[7]

Second, there are significant difficulties in empirically identifying theatrical performance as a strategic political behavior and in distinguishing it from its alternatives. On the one hand, some researchers illustrate the theatrical dimension of politics by using interpretive methods, but sometimes eschew claims about causes and effects.[8] On the other hand, some make greater headway at establishing causal relations, but give less attention to the many possible interpretations of the same observations.[9]

For example, recent studies of the politics of authoritarian regimes reveal that their officials can sometimes be attentive to public demands, giving rise to a new literature on authoritarian responsiveness.[10] But this responsiveness may be interpreted in several ways. Is it aimed at substantively resolving citizen demands? Or is it meant to foster an impression of good governance, that is, performative? How can we tell the performative apart from the substantive when they may appear equivalent to the public eye?

To answer these questions, this article analyzes a policy issue in which grievances are pressing and resolution is prohibitive: air pollution in China. Believed to have caused about one million premature deaths in

[5] For performativity in the economy, see MacKenzie 2004 and Butler 2010.

[6] Gerth and Mills 1946, 228.

[7] Gerth and Mills 1946, 79, 245–64; Alexander 2010.

[8] For example, in his famous study of nineteenth-century Bali, Geertz insists that spectacles of the state were not means to political ends but ends in themselves: "power serves pomp, not pomp power" (Geertz 1980, 13). Wedeen's 2015 study of Syria under Hafiz al-Asad is similarly cautious about causal claims. On the one hand, coerced participation in Asad's cult of personality enforced citizens' obedience to the regime, but on the other hand, "acting as if" may plant seeds for rebellion. Such causal ambiguity can also be seen in Roberts' 2012 study of rituals in Tokugawa Japan.

[9] Simmons 2016.

[10] E.g., Nathan 2003; Malesky and Schuler 2010; Chen, Pan, and Xu 2016; Distelhorst and Hou 2017.

the country in 2010 alone,[11] air pollution is a source of wide public concern[12] and rising social unrest.[13] In a national survey I conducted in 2015, 79 percent of respondents reported that pollution control was more important than economic development if the two desiderata were to come into conflict, and 65 percent of respondents expressed a willingness to join environmental protests.[14] Previous studies highlight the insuperable difficulties faced by the bureaucratic state in enforcing environmental regulations amid pressure from private firms to show regulatory forbearance and from party leaders not to undermine economic growth.[15]

Given the severity of China's environmental problems, the associated public outcry, and chronic enforcement challenges, how can the state redeem itself? A prevailing view about the Chinese party-state (CCP) is that it obtains political support by providing material benefits to its people—"performance legitimacy."[16] No one would deny that the CCP receives popular support on some occasions and in some areas by improving standards of living. But neither would anyone claim that the party-state always manages to deliver what citizens demand and deserve.

What does the state do in areas where it cannot deliver—when substantive governance is hard to come by? What does the state do when public expectations exceed its actual governing capacity? I argue that part of the answer to these questions lies in the state's theatrical performance of good governance—performative governance. In so doing, I disaggregate what's collectively known as "the state"[17] into its various bureaucratic branches, which are vested with different functions, resources, and levels of authority.[18] I argue that when bureaucratic capacity is low but public scrutiny is high, governance is most likely to be performative.

[11] Lozano et al. 2012.
[12] Alkon and Wang 2018.
[13] Stern 2013, 9.
[14] Ding Forthcoming, chap. 4.
[15] E.g., Lieberthal 1997; Jahiel 1998; Qi 2008; Lo et al. 2012; Zhou et al. 2013; Kostka 2016.
[16] E.g., Zhao 2009; Zhu 2011.
[17] I differentiate the bureaucratic state from a political regime, which refers to either the form of government (e.g., democracy or dictatorship) or the individuals and/or groups holding preeminent political power within a country (e.g., military regime or single-party regime). Strictly speaking, a regime sets the rules and the state carries them out. But this conceptual difference does not mean that the regime and the state cannot merge (e.g., party-states), or that bureaucrats cannot influence policymaking. See Lieberthal 1992; Mertha 2009.
[18] This way of seeing the state is less holistic than Weber's oft-used definition of a state as a "human community that claims the monopoly over the legitimate use of physical force." Violence is surely important to state formation, but it is "not the only means of the state." The modern state is so large and so internally complex that it would be misleading to treat a street-level bureaucrat, even in the most authoritarian system, as a member of any monolithic power monopoly. Gerth and Mills 1946, 78.

The following section offers my definition of performative governance. I then unpack capacity and scrutiny as two crucial predictors of state-bureaucratic behavior. Next, I briefly introduce the context of environmental governance in contemporary China, followed by an account of my methodology. As an empirical matter, I use ethnographic evidence from five months of participant observation at a municipal environmental protection bureau to show how low capacity and high scrutiny give rise to performative governance. I conclude with the implications of my findings, including a discussion of performative breakdown—that is, when performative governance fails to foster the impression of good governance.

Performative Governance and Performance Legitimacy

In recent decades, the notion of performance legitimacy has gained popularity in the mass media and among scholars of authoritarian regimes who posit that nonelectoral regimes may achieve Weberian legitimacy—popular belief in the virtue of the political system and its authorities—by substantively improving citizens' lives.[19] The performance legitimacy of authoritarian regimes is often juxtaposed with procedural legitimacy in democracies, where formal institutions of accountability sustain the perceived intrinsic virtues of the political system, even when the delivery of expected material benefits falls short.[20]

In the case of the CCP, there is little debate that its substantive performance has been real, especially in the economic realm. China has become the world's second-largest economy by nominal GDP. Despite widening income inequality, material life has improved significantly for most citizens. Even in the trying realm of environmental protection, which surely compromises economic growth, the CCP has taken bold strides.[21] In surveys, Chinese citizens express fairly strong support for the regime.[22]

Yet the literature on performance legitimacy often overlooks its subjective nature: what constitutes good or bad performance is ultimately a function of citizens' beliefs. A basic fact about mass opinion is that beliefs are malleable and mercurial.[23] Any assumption that tangible improvement of citizens' lives automatically translates into political

[19] E.g., Weatherford 1987; Bueno de Mesquita and Downs 2005; Gilley 2008; Zhao 2009; Zhu 2011.
[20] Gibson 1989; Sunshine and Tyler 2003; Schmidt 2013.
[21] van der Kamp 2020.
[22] Wang 2005; Dickson 2016; Tang 2016.
[23] E.g., Bernays [1928] 2005; Zaller 1992.

support is therefore flawed. One need look no further than the United States, where an income tax cut for 95 percent of Americans yielded no political payoff for the Obama administration—instead, 77 percent of Americans mistakenly thought taxes had either stayed the same or increased.[24] Similarly, after school fees were abolished in China, local governments received no credit for assuming more of the cost of public education.[25]

Suffice it to say, the objective quality of government performance is not enough to produce subjective perceptions of good governance. But is objective performance necessary? When the state faces a contentious society willing to challenge its "mandate of heaven," can it only redeem itself by responding substantively? Or does it see other options?

To gain a fuller picture of the state's options, we must first separate its image from its practices,[26] since these are often conflicting, if not contradictory.[27] For example, an authoritarian state that seems omnipotent may be fragmented in practice.[28] A state may appear independent and autonomous, but is in fact embedded in society[29] and in the international economy.[30] While such departure of a state's image from its practices is received wisdom, less attention has been paid to whether and how the bureaucratic arms of the state manage their own images, and what kind of images they seek to project.[31]

My approach echoes that of sociologist Erving Goffman, who likens everyday social interaction to theatrical performance. Goffman argues that when individuals appear before others they "present [themselves] in a light that is favorable to [themselves],"[32] strategically using certain language, gestures, and symbols to influence the impressions others form of them. These "front stage" acts may differ from behavior on the "back stage," where actors do not face an audience.[33] While Goffman limits his analysis to the "physical confines of a building or plant," I apply his metaphor of the front stage to the public sphere, and examine state-society relations through a similar dramaturgical lens.[34]

I define performative governance as the state's theatrical deployment

[24] Mettler 2011, 1–2.
[25] Lü 2014.
[26] Mitchell 1991.
[27] Migdal and Schlichte 2005.
[28] Lieberthal 1992; Mertha 2009. Also see Greitens 2017 on the gap between the popular image and substantive practices of the coercive apparatus of the Chinese state.
[29] Evans 1995.
[30] Wallerstein 2011.
[31] E.g., Carpenter 2010.
[32] Goffman 1959, 7.
[33] Goffman 1959, chap. III.
[34] Goffman 1959, xi.

of visual, verbal, and gestural symbols to foster an impression of good governance before an audience of citizens. My definition borrows from Judith Butler's definition of performativity as "language, gesture, and all manners of symbolic social sign."[35] I use *performative* to refer to the theatrical dimension of state behavior, thus distinguishing it from the substantive dimension of what is typically meant by government performance. For example, "performance" in "performance legitimacy" means the tangible accomplishment of developmental and redistributive goals, rather than the theatrical representation of good governance. References to the CCP's performance legitimacy, especially in the media, typically relate to China's GDP growth.[36]

Capacity and Scrutiny

The idea behind performative governance is not new, but few have considered its boundaries or alternatives. Even Goffman acknowledges that "all the world's not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn't are not easy to specify."[37] Since performative governance aims to create an impression of good governance, how can we tell whether governance is theatrical or substantive when the two may be superficially indistinguishable? This section specifies the ways in which the behavior of the bureaucratic state is and is not performative.

I argue that two factors play essential parts in shaping state behavior—capacity and scrutiny. When state capacity is low and public scrutiny high, we are likely to see performative governance. My unit of analysis is at the level of bureaucratic behavior, understanding that different parts of the state vary in how much capacity they enjoy and how much scrutiny they endure. That said, since the state is an aggregate of bureaucratic agencies, the theory of bureaucratic behavior that I present here has broader implications for state behavior as a whole.

I use *capacity* to refer to the state's logistical ability and political au-

[35] Butler 1988, 270. I draw my definition from Butler and my analytical approach from Goffman. Important differences in their theories are worth clarifying. Goffman's performativity (though he does not use the word) is a strategy of impression management; Butler's is obedience to cultural hegemony. Goffman sees a clear separation between the front stage and the back stage, between one's public role and private self. For Butler, the two stages are inseparable; performativity constitutes the performer's very identity—the role is the self. Goffman is more interested in the outward effects of performativity on the audience and the environment. Butler, to the extent she is interested in causes and effects, focuses on the inward, disciplinary effects of performativity on the performer. The word "performative" was first used by the British philosopher J. L. Austin to describe speech acts. Its contemporary usage has extended to nonverbal, symbolic aspects of behavior.

[36] Legitimacy based on economic performance has also been invoked in studies of democracies. See, e.g., Lipset 1959.

[37] Goffman 1959, 72.

thority to perform its various functions; when it comes to a single bureaucratic agency, it means the agency's resources and authority to carry out its functional mandates.[38] Empirical research has measured state capacity with GDP,[39] tax revenue as a percentage of GDP,[40] taxation of the rich,[41] or the "Weberianness" of individual bureaucracies.[42] These measures tend either to overlook the state's internal variations or to extrapolate state capacity from its most powerful agencies—usually economic or coercive organizations.[43] By the very logic of the developmental state literature, some regulatory agencies, such as those entrusted with environmental and labor protection, must be weak for economic agencies to exert their full strength.[44]

Furthermore, capacity is relative. A bureaucracy that seems well endowed cannot enforce regulations if its object of enforcement has more influence, or if it is overruled by stronger bureaucracies. Thus, even for states considered to have high capacity, significant variations exist within them.[45]

The capacity to do anything at all necessarily means the capacity to engage in bad behavior. After all, "state" and "bureaucracy" are often used as pejoratives associated with stagnation and staleness. What, then, prevents the state from engaging in foot-dragging or organized "banditry"[46] all the time? I use *scrutiny* to refer to the extent to which the state, or a single bureaucracy within it, is placed under critical examination for its performance.

I specifically focus on scrutiny by the wider audience of society, which is ostensibly irrelevant to bureaucrats whose salaries, bonuses, promotions, and dismissals are determined by internal rules. For example, although Weber critiques the "mere 'power politician'" for being "constantly in danger of becoming an actor . . . and of being concerned merely with the 'impression' he makes,"[47] he argues that bureaucratic behavior is

[38] Capacity of a bureaucracy is usually a product of executive delegation. That said, existing research also shows that bureaucracies can seek and wield power independent of the executive. See, e.g., Lieberthal 1992; Carpenter 2001; Seligsohn 2019.

[39] Fearon and Laitin 2003.

[40] Cheibub 1998.

[41] Slater, Smith, and Nair 2014.

[42] Evans and Rauch 1999.

[43] Johnson 1982; Evans and Rauch 1999.

[44] The renewable energy sector may be an exception that promotes both industrial development and energy efficiency. However, current methods of manufacturing, deploying, and recycling renewable technologies also produce substantial pollution. Furthermore, income growth itself incentivizes greater energy consumption. Hence, the trade-off between economic growth and environmental protection remains real.

[45] Lieberthal 1992; Carpenter 2010.

[46] Olson 1993.

[47] Gerth and Mills 1946, 116.

driven by "discipline," "legal statute," and "functional competence."[48] This hypothesized difference is based on a key assumption about the audience: a politician's main audience is the wider public, whereas a bureaucrat's main audience is his or her superior.

Yet bureaucrats are not always insulated from public opinion. First, street-level bureaucrats' continual encounters with citizens make it hard for them to stick to their prescribed marching orders. As Michael Lipsky writes, "On the one hand, the work is highly scripted to achieve policy objectives that have their origins in the political process. On the other hand, the work requires improvisation and responsiveness to the individual case."[49]

Second, the advent of the information age and the rise of social media subject any state agent—from the top echelons to the street level—to the peering eye of the public. Bureaucrats who used to be tucked away, safe from the spotlight of public attention, must now confront public scrutiny as politicians do. This is true not only in democracies but also in nondemocracies, where an extensive literature shows that public opinion matters.[50] I argue that when the state lacks the capacity to resolve citizens' concerns but is under strong public pressure to do so, it is much more likely to engage in performative governance to persuade citizens of its virtue, if not its efficacy.

But what kind of governance results when capacity and scrutiny assume other values? Figure 1 presents a typology of state behavior that helps delimit the boundaries around the concept of performative governance.

First, when both capacity and scrutiny are low, the state tends to be inert: it lacks the logistical capacity and political authority to perform its functions, and it confronts little public pressure to do so. Catherine Boone's research on West Africa shows state inertia in regions without valuable export commodities.[51] Jennifer Murtazashvili finds that archaic Soviet bureaucracies linger, and languish, in several policy areas of limited public importance in contemporary Central Asia.[52] Inert bureaucracies may exist for multiple reasons. They may be kept on life support to provide employment, as Anna Grzymała-Busse demonstrates in some postsocialist systems.[53] Or they may be inert because

[48] Gerth and Mills 1946, 79, 228–62.
[49] Lipsky 2010, 10.
[50] E.g., Reilly 2012; Weiss 2014; Tang 2016.
[51] Boone 2003.
[52] Murtazashvili 2019.
[53] Grzymała-Busse 2007, 5.

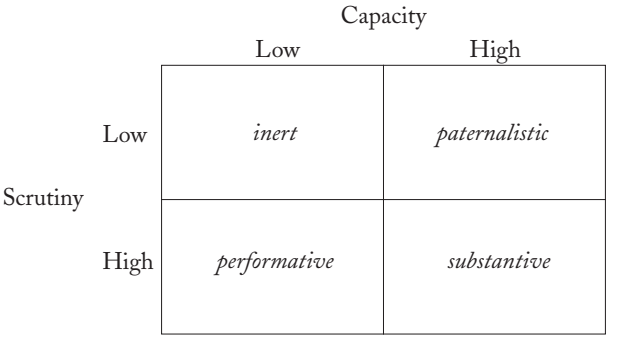

FIGURE 1
CAPACITY, SCRUTINY, AND STATE BEHAVIOR

their functions are perceived to be relatively unimportant. For example, the Chinese Environmental Protection Bureau (EPB) remained largely inert for decades after its establishment in the early 1980s until the mid-2000s, when public scrutiny intensified.

Second, when capacity is strong and scrutiny is weak, the state exhibits paternalism. Paternalistic states can do good or ill with the autonomy that results from a lack of public scrutiny: they can be developmental or predatory. Police departments in the United States are bureaucratic agencies whose capacities have historically outstripped public scrutiny, often leading to predatory behavior. Kevin O'Brien and Lianjiang Li's study of policy implementation in the Chinese countryside finds that "cadre insulation from social pressure … [has] encouraged the execution of unpopular but not of popular policies."[54] At the national level, scholars of rentier states argue that because these states rely on the sale of natural resources rather than on income taxes for their revenues, their citizens tend to voice less demand for representation and are more tolerant of state repression.[55] Meanwhile, the developmental state literature argues that autonomy from societal groups allows authorities to craft beneficial industrial policies even when those policies may hurt certain societal interests in the short term.[56] Although the outcomes may differ dramatically, these paternalistic state behaviors share the common underlying features of high capacity and low scrutiny.

[54] O'Brien and Li 1999.
[55] Beblawi 1987; Ross 2001.
[56] Johnson 1982; Evans 1995.

Third, when capacity and scrutiny are both strong, state behavior tends to be most substantive: the state has the capacity to perform its key functions and public scrutiny will hold it accountable if it fails. Wealthy democracies are the most likely candidates for substantive governance because of their overall high state capacity and invasive public opinion, but substantive governance exists elsewhere, too. Lily Tsai's study of public goods provision in Chinese villages is an example. Village leaders who were accountable to scrutiny from villagers within their "solidary groups" built schools and paved roads when they had the resources to do so.[57]

Last, and crucially for this article, when capacity is low and scrutiny is high, state behavior tends to be performative. The state or bureaucracy in question lacks the logistical capacity and political authority to deliver good governance outcomes, but is pressured to appear responsive to appease public opinion. Performative governance is most likely to be found among resource-poor, street-level bureaucracies on the front line of state-society interaction.

My typology provides a way to interpret state behavior without access to its back stage, but it is not deterministic. Additional factors, such as culture, ideology, leadership, and interest groups, also warrant serious consideration. These pure types of state behavior also need not be mutually exclusive. No single state or bureaucracy is utterly inert, unstoppably autonomous, relentlessly performative, or consistently substantive. This typology helps to predict the kind of government behavior that becomes prioritized when state capacity and public scrutiny assume different values.

China's Environmental State

China has been developing a comprehensive system of environmental governance throughout the reform era. Although its policies and regulations may appear strong on paper, enforcement problems abound. After all, some bureaucracies are more equal than others. In China's fragmented state, policy-making unfolds through competition and bargaining across bureaucratic and geographical fault lines.[58] Even with the increased centralization of power in recent years, Beijing still needs to set priorities, given its inevitable resource constraints. As a result, bureaucracies are endowed with varying degrees of infrastructural power and political clout. The Organization Department, for instance, is

[57] Tsai 2007.
[58] Lieberthal and Oksenberg 1988; Lieberthal 1992.

known to be almighty because cadre management is essential to the party's survival. Economic bureaucracies, such as the National Development and Reform Council (NDRC) and local development and reform councils (DRC), are also powerful, since economic development has been, and still is, the party's top priority.

Because economic growth and environmental protection are often at odds, the Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP), which became the Ministry of Ecology and Environment (MEE) after the 2018 administrative reform, and its local EPB branches are often referred to as weak bureaucracies (*ruoshi bumen*) in the lexicon of Chinese governance. The regime cultivates cadres for leadership positions by posting them to strong bureaucracies (*qiangshi bumen*), such as the NDRC,[59] while placing those it does not intend to promote in weaker bureaucracies, such as the MEP. In 2015, the NDRC had three full members and one alternate member on the Party Central Committee. By contrast, the MEP was the only bureaucracy under the State Council that had no seats on the committee. Empirical research finds that a career in strong bureaucracies means a greater likelihood of promotion to the regime's most powerful positions.[60] To take a standard monetary metric of capacity, the MEP's budget in 2018 was only 5 percent that of the Ministry of Health, a bureaucracy that is by no means China's strongest.[61]

Yet the environmental bureaucracy's weakness has not led the public to cut it any slack, as evinced by the growing number of environmental petitions, protests, and complaints. While environmental protection itself has not historically been central to the performance evaluation of local leaders, protest has. When local cadres fail to prevent a large-scale environmental crisis, an environmental problem becomes a de facto problem of social stability, in which case the one-vote veto (*yipiao foujue*) rule may be invoked to overshadow all their other achievements. Hence, assuaging grievances about pollution is critical to the career security of local leaders and their subordinates.

But this imperative to mollify public opinion brings the EPBs back to their original problem—the lack of de facto capacity to enforce regulations. Given the double trouble of high scrutiny and low capacity, how do local EPBs deal?

[59] It also sends them to govern important regions like Shanghai and Tibet.

[60] Wong and Zeng 2018.

[61] Although budget and revenue are popular proxies for bureaucratic strength, they do not provide perfect, apples-to-apples comparisons across bureaucracies. There is variation in the extent to which state spending on a particular policy is channeled through the corresponding bureaucracy. This statistic simply underscores that the MEP is especially weak.

Methods

Distinguishing performative governance from substantive governance is a tricky empirical task, especially since the very purpose of performative governance is to foster the image of good governance. When only the state's front stage is within sight of the researcher, these conceptually distinct phenomena may become observationally equivalent.[62] I therefore endeavored to observe the inner workings of the bureaucracy and compare its front-stage acts with its backstage ones. This gave me abundant in-depth observations, both for interpretive purposes and as "causal process observations,"[63] even though these acts exist within the same case.

For five months in 2013–2014, I participated in the daily operations of the municipal EPB in "Lakeville," a relatively wealthy city in the Yangtze River Delta. Its GDP per capita is about twice the nation's average. The city suffered from significant air pollution. In 2013, it was blanketed in smog for two-thirds of the year; in January 2014, air quality on all but two days was "very unhealthy," according to China's official air quality guideline, meaning that "every person in the population may experience serious health effects." Given Lakeville's high income, its EPB should have especially high capacity for substantive governance among Chinese cities, making performative governance "least likely" there.[64]

Ethnographic and experimental research raise concerns about observer effect (also known as the Hawthorne effect)—the impact an outside observer's presence has on the subjects' behavior.[65] Since I had nothing to do with bureaucrats' promotion or discipline, and I was not an authority figure or a special guest, there was no reason for the bureaucrats to alter their behavior for my audience. That said, I consciously avoided potential observer effect throughout the study. For example, I never passed verbal judgment on the bureaucracy's operations, I kept quiet during encounters with firms and citizens, and I always made sure to stay in the background. My goal was to understand governance, not to promote good governance.

Participant observation allowed me to empirically distinguish per-

[62] To borrow Geertz's 2008 example of twitch versus wink, which he borrowed from the philosopher Gilbert Ryle: The rapid contraction of an eyelid may be an involuntary twitch or a conspiratorial wink. To tell which is which, we may ask in an interview, but there is no guarantee that our "subject" is self-aware, even when speaking sincerely.

[63] Brady and Collier 2010.

[64] Eckstein 1975.

[65] Recent studies have challenged the significance of Hawthorne effects in field experiments. See, e.g., De Quidt, Haushofer, and Roth 2018; Mummolo and Peterson 2019.

formative governance from its alternatives, such as substantive governance. It also allowed me to interpret bureaucratic behavior without having to ask bureaucrats why they behaved a certain way—since self-reporting can be biased.[66] Do bureaucrats speak and behave differently in front of the public (that is, on the front stage) than they do in their offices (on the back stage)? Do bureaucrats actually expect to catch polluters through inspections? If not, why do they invest so much of their energy and scarce resources on these inspections, traveling long distances and sometimes staying up all night?

Performative Governance in Action

The government organization responsible for enforcing environmental laws, policies, and regulations in Lakeville is its municipal EPB, established in 1980, just after the launch of economic reforms. The EPB's transformation since then has been a story of Weberian metamorphosis, or so it appears, characterized by its increasing size, division of labor, formalization of rules, and professionalization of the workforce.[67] Yet despite substantial expansion and apparent rationalization, environmental governance in Lakeville still faced many of the same well-documented hardships that handicap local EPBs all across China—generally, a paucity of political clout and administrative capacity to enforce regulations.

At the time of my research, local EPBs had no authority to shut down factories. There were more than eight thousand key-point polluting enterprises in Lakeville, but each month, fewer than five would receive a small fine. On a daily basis, in their backstage conversations in the office, bureaucrats lamented the impossibility of their job: districts and counties evading requests to punish enterprises that violated regulations; upper-level authorities lacking an understanding of local conditions; bad apples from a neighboring province dumping solid industrial wastes across the border; and highfalutin environmental scientists at local research institutions hectoring the EPB at interagency meetings, showing no sympathy for the agency's limited authority. Again and again, bureaucrats in Lakeville and elsewhere, at the EPB and other agencies, re-

[66] I supplemented my participant observation in Lakeville with interviews of Lakeville citizens and environmental bureaucrats in Shenzhen (a wealthy coastal city), Chengdu (a moderately well-off inland city), and Guiyang (a poorer inland city).

[67] Features of the EPB also depart significantly from the kind of neotraditionalism captured by studies of bureaucracies under socialism. See Jowitt 1983; Walder 1986.

peated the same message: the EPB is a weak bureaucracy (*huanbao*[68] *shi ruoshi bumen*). Remarks about the EPB's weakness also appear frequently in academic research.[69]

If low capacity was its only hindrance, the Lakeville EPB would most likely be inert, as was the case before the mid-2000s. But the bigger headache was the city's residents, who were anything but quiescent. Citizens have myriad ways to voice their complaints, including the Provincial Governor's Mailbox, Mayor's Hotline, Mayor's Mailbox, the EPB Director's Mailbox, the Environmental Protection Hotline, and the EPB's Online Petition web page. They can also write letters, make phone calls, and pay personal visits to the EPB office. All environmental complaints in Lakeville are redirected to its EPB. In 2013, the EPB responded to about ten thousand environmental complaints (approximately three hundred per day), of which 52 percent concerned air pollution, 19 percent noise pollution, and 17 percent water pollution.

A candid remark often heard in the office was that "the common folk (*laobaixing*) nowadays are powerful" or "the common folk nowadays are hard to deal with." A favorite story circulating among these bedraggled bureaucrats involved several farmers who protested against a county EPB by moving into its office with their rice cookers and camping out for five days straight, playing poker to pass the time. On another occasion, the Lakeville EPB was compelled to launch a major investigation into wastewater pollution at a paper plant because the complainant, who turned out to be an employee of a rival factory, managed to obtain the EPB director's cell phone number and filed a petition via personal text message.

Worse yet, "environmental problem" (*huanjing wenti*) is not a well-defined term; anything loosely related to the living environment can be considered environmental. Thus many complaints that fell outside the EPB's purview still found their way to its desks: noise from construction sites, smoke from food stalls, flies in restaurant food, and occasionally even traffic jams. Much time was spent redirecting these complaints to the proper bureaucracy.

Citizen complaints tangibly affect bureaucrats' career security. Although civil servants are mostly disciplined by internal bureaucratic rules, public opinion often plays a decisive, and sometimes capricious, role in their fate, which makes public scrutiny a crucial driver of bureaucratic behavior. Bureaucrats meticulously maintained their image when they were out in public, constantly on the lookout for suspicious cit-

[68] Huanbao is short for "environmental protection" or "environmental protection bureau."

[69] Qi 2008; Pan 2015. The EPB has also been called an example of a clear water yamen (*qingshui yamen*)—a bureaucracy that brings in less revenue and is on the periphery of governance concerns.

izens. When stopping to have lunch between inspections, even at a modest restaurant, they would take off their uniforms before leaving the car, fearing that citizens would post pictures on social media of them eating out, which could, with some vivid embellishment, turn into evidence of state corruption.

Weak bureaucracies like the EPB are usually saddled with blame in public opinion crises. Citizens may contact lower-level bureaucracies when grievances first arise, and then move up the political hierarchy if their complaints remain unresolved. To avoid potential fallout from upper-level authorities who wield de jure power to discipline and fire their subordinates, lower-level bureaucrats try to neutralize grievances before they escalate. It's important to emphasize that upper-level authorities' de jure power of dismissal would be much more sparely exercised if citizens did not have de facto influence over state agents.

Face Work

Out of concern for its public image, which is directly linked to the bureaucrats' career security, the Lakeville EPB was highly sensitive to public opinion. Despite the agency's multiple formal functions,[70] employees spent most of their working hours—about 75 percent—addressing citizen complaints. When those complaints intensified, the EPB's apparent Weberianness would disintegrate: planned operations were cast aside, the division of labor broke down, and the agency would divert most of its resources and manpower to the single task of responding to the mountain of citizen complaints. Yet this urgency to appease restive citizens would take the EPB back to its original problem—the lack of capacity to resolve public grievances.

Instead, bureaucrats engaged in performative governance—the symbolic display of good governance to foster a favorable impression of the agency to its public audience. One bureaucrat called this "face work," which is also how Goffman describes impression management.[71] Face work just so happens to be part of the bureaucrats' own lexicon for performative governance, and should be distinguished from face projects (*mianzi gongcheng*) or performance projects (*zhengji gongcheng*), which refer to some large-scale infrastructural projects, such as airports, bridges, and parks, used by local officials to draw attention to economic development in their region. These projects have been criticized by

[70] These include providing public education, issuing pollution permits, protecting natural resources, controlling different types of pollutants, and conducting regular inspections at plants.

[71] Goffman 1967.

the central government as white elephants. Performative governance is quite different. It focuses on the little things: attitudes, gestures, and intentions.

Face work has three main parts: appearing responsive to public opinion, demonstrating benevolent intentions, and making efforts visible to the wider public. First, bureaucrats are keen to maintain responsiveness to citizen complaints, even if only symbolically. Each complaint is to be thoroughly investigated and receive a prompt response, usually within two to three weeks. Sometimes petitioners are invited to take part in the investigations and offer leads. At other times, the agency organizes hearings to collect citizens' advice on local pollution management. A bureaucrat at the Shenzhen EPB reported extreme sensitivity to public opinion: "In the middle of my siesta one day,[72] I was awoken by a continuous knocking on my window. I opened the curtain and jumped to my feet when I saw a citizen right outside my window ready to lodge a complaint."[73]

This image of responsiveness should not be equated with responsiveness in a substantive sense, that is, the conformity of public policy outputs or outcomes to societal preferences. Substantive responsiveness is far from absent in China. Reform-era politics is rife with responsive policy changes, such as the abolishment of agricultural taxes[74] and the legalization of private enterprise.[75] Symbolic responsiveness differs in its lack of actual—or even attempted—resolution of the underlying problem.

But just responding is not enough. The second element of performative governance is demonstrating benevolent intentions (or service-orientedness) to citizens. This orientation includes gestures of concern, care, and submission to the people. It requires the state to treat its citizens as customers. The notion of service-oriented government (*fuwuxing zhengfu*), first introduced in the 17th National Congress in 2007, has become popularized in Chinese public administration.[76] Service-oriented governance is often compared to and discussed as a shift away from outdated management-oriented government (*guanlixing zhengfu*). The theoretical difference between the two is that service-

[72] Lunch-break siestas are common in Chinese organizations. Some employees keep a folding bed in the office, or block off their cubicle with blinds for a half-hour nap.

[73] Author interview with EPB bureaucrat in Shenzhen, China, June 17, 2016.

[74] See Bernstein and Lü 2003 for evidence that agricultural taxes and fees were a major source of discontent in the countryside. The party abolished all agricultural taxes and fees in 2006.

[75] Tsai 2006 traces how de facto privatization led the party to legalize private enterprises.

[76] In Chinese terms, this notion constitutes a shift in political culture from primacy of officials (*guanbenwei*) to primacy of citizens (*minbenwei*).

oriented governance is driven by citizens' expressed needs, whereas management-oriented governance is more paternalistic, defining citizens' needs before addressing them.

The EPB's petition office is open seven days a week, holidays included. When petitioners arrive with their complaints, they are first offered warm tea and a comfortable couch to rest on. Tellingly, the EPB's only leather couch sits in its petition office, which is one of the EPB's biggest and brightest rooms. (In contrast, office space for cadres has been downsized in recent years.) During their training, bureaucrats learn the proper etiquette of public relations management. For example, when fielding citizen phone calls, they are taught never to be the first to hang up, regardless of the call's content or the caller's tone. On a few occasions during my participant observation, when the caller's grievances turned out to be irrelevant to environmental pollution, such as one citizen's conflict with a neighbor and another's marital complaints, the bureaucrat handling the call promptly assumed the role of therapist. When I asked one bureaucrat why he sometimes let unreasonable petitioners berate him, he answered with a question of his own: "Do I let him curse at me or do I want to lose my rice bowl [job]?"

Every year the municipal government holds multiple town hall events, during which directors of various bureaucratic agencies, including the EPB, give onstage presentations followed by a question-and-answer session with citizen representatives. In one town hall, a citizen showed pictures of the city's polluted rivers and asked the directors if they were ashamed to see them: "Do your faces turn red or not?" Another citizen sarcastically suggested inviting calligraphers to use the black water as ink, eliciting a round of audience applause. A third citizen handed each director a cup of water from a local river, and demanded that the directors take a close look at, and smell, the pungent fruit of their lackluster performance. One director examined the water sample, took a deep sniff, and sincerely apologized for their insufficient efforts.

The third element of performative governance involves making sure face work goes public so that it is visible on the front stage of public communication. Each online complaint is immediately published and quickly investigated. The EPB's website also posts photo-illustrated stories of its inspections. These stories are mostly accurate, but are sometimes embellished or dramatized to move the audience: inspectors braving the snow to conduct an inspection, skipping sleep to catch polluters, tirelessly pursuing and sternly admonishing polluters, or outsmarting evasive polluters during inspections, even if the enterprise went unpunished in the end.

Bureaucrats are also encouraged to talk to the media, although they are often reluctant to do so. An informal guide to emergency response encouraged them to be more "proactive" with media outreach, and to "face up directly to the media . . . acquire experience . . . accept interviews." Bureaucrats should "speak the truth, objectively explain the process" to journalists, but also—considering the agency's lack of substantive efficacy—"avoid speaking about results."[77]

Bureaucrats are well aware that the EPB is not a bureaucracy with de facto power (*shiquan bumen*). Yet to maintain the impression of good governance and thus shelter the agency and its agents from potential political fallout, bureaucrats conducted performative governance with the utmost diligence.

Foul Air Law Enforcement Operation

As a prime example of performative governance, consider the Foul Air Law Enforcement Operation. In October 2013, the EPB saw a spike in citizen complaints about air pollution. There was also a rise in repeated petitions (*chongfu xinfang*), which the EPB treats with extra caution. Many of the complaints originated from residential areas near an industrial development zone in Lakeville's District S. The manufacturing plants in District S contribute significant revenue to the local government's coffers, but they also produce substantial air pollution that bothers residents. This problem is exacerbated by the area's highly mixed land use. In the 2000s, relatively cheaper land prices in District S (compared to other districts in the municipality) attracted manufacturing firms and real estate developers alike. Two dozen residential compounds sprouted up near the industrial development zone, occupying about 25 percent of the district's land. Several universities opened campuses there as well. In 2013, about half a million Lakeville citizens lived in District S. Not surprisingly, the proximity of industrial enterprises to residential areas turned District S into a hotbed of environmental grievances.

Citizens spoke candidly in their complaints. In one fierce online petition, a citizen fumed, "Has everyone at the EPB dropped dead? Why is no one taking care of this strong rubber smell? Taxpayers are raising a bunch of lazy animals. Are you in bed with the businesses you regulate?"

Other common phrases in these complaints include: "smelly air stinks up the heavens" (*chouqi xun tian*); "waste air disturbs the residents" (*feiqi*

[77] Author's collection.

raomin); "odor stings the nose" (*qiwei cibi*); "[I] dare not keep the windows open (*bugan kaichuang*)"; "[Company name] stealthily discharges waste air (*toupai feiqi*)"; "[Air pollution] affects residents' physical and psychological health (*yingxiang jumin shenxin jiankang*)"; "the EPB does nothing" (*huanbaoju bu zuowei*); "[EPB] supervision is lacking" (*huanbaoju jianguan buli*); "return the residents' rights to breathe fresh air" (*huan jumin huxi xinxian kongqi de quanli*)."

These complaints make two things clear. First, citizens were upset about air pollution and did not hold back when expressing their discontent to the state. Second, they held the environmental bureaucracy responsible for taking care of the problem.

After a few agency meetings to discuss the issue, the EPB launched a spontaneous law enforcement operation (*zhifa xingdong*), which means a burst of intensive inspections targeting specific areas or industries. In one meeting, mid-level bureaucrats discussed whether the operation should be called the Air Pollution Law Enforcement Operation or the Foul Air Law Enforcement Operation. They eventually chose "foul air," deciding that the operation should be aimed at addressing complaints related to the smell of the air, since the term "air pollution" may call attention to the agency's inability to resolve the underlying problem of unhealthy air quality. In the end, even the foul stench remained unresolved.

The entire operation in District S consisted of three stages over four weeks: investigation, inspection, and response. First, bureaucrats collected data on citizen complaints from multiple sources, including petitions registered online, over the phone, and in person, as well as complaints filed at the district EPB. They then analyzed the origins of the complaints, identified problem areas to target the operation, and composed a list of thirty firms deemed most suspicious, including rubber factories, plastic factories, wastewater treatment plants, fertilizer plants, and livestock farms. Inspectors then spent three days traveling around the district to verify the complaints. By the end of the week, the agency had devised a plan of action.

The second stage of the operation, lasting two weeks, consisted of daily surprise visits to two or three enterprises on the EPB's list of suspected polluters. Upon arrival, inspectors invited a representative, either the factory owner or a manager, to join the inspection. After checking the firm's pollution permits, Environmental Impact Assessment Report, and pollution abatement facilities (whether they were up-to-date and running), inspectors would select three monitoring spots on the edge of the property and collect three air samples from each one. The

entire inspection was meticulously recorded with photographic, video, and documentary evidence. At the end of each inspection, inspectors wrote up a detailed report. They then asked the firm's representative to read the entire record and, if he or she agreed with the account, to sign and fingerprint it.

Most, but not all, factory representatives cooperated with the inspectors patiently and politely. At one fertilizer plant, the cunning owner insisted he was illiterate and unable to read the inspection report. An inspector proceeded to read the entire report to him, but the plant owner still refused to sign, claiming he could not understand it. At their wits' end, inspectors took a video of his refusal to cooperate before leaving.

In theory, the photos and videos could be used to establish administrative cases against polluters. In practice, because the EPB lacked de facto power to punish polluters, the evidence was used to demonstrate the sincerity of the agency's efforts, and was saved in case further opprobrium was showered on the EPB for its lack of concern for citizen complaints.

A few days into this operation, inspectors encountered a rare event—all the enterprises they visited had pollution abatement facilities operating perfectly. Inspectors noticed this anomaly immediately, since enterprises they visited would frequently report some kind of problem with their pollution treatment facilities (for example, that it had broken down the day before the inspection). But this seeming corporate social responsibility turned out to be performative as well. Conversations with local residents revealed that as word spread about the inspections, polluters in District S had moved the bulk of their production under the cover of night, between midnight and 6 a.m., when residents and inspectors were believed to be asleep. "You have to go there after midnight," a citizen suggested, and his advice was promptly followed. Inspectors launched surreptitious night inspections at 2 or 3 a.m., and even they were appalled by the amount of air pollution that was found. After lingering at a fertilizer plant for an hour one night, the inspectors' uniforms and car were tainted by the pungent odor of livestock feces that persisted for an entire week.

The air samples collected at each inspection were sent to the Environmental Monitoring Station (an EPB subsidiary), where they were diluted to one-twentieth of their original concentration. Six certified smell testers would perform a human sensory analysis and vote on whether the enterprise had violated regulations on the odor of waste air. The actual substances in the air samples were never tested, despite the availability of chemosensoring technologies. In other words, what mattered was whether the waste air was smelly, not whether it was harm-

ful. Despite its formal authority to assess and mitigate pollution, the EPB limited its investigation to the stench of waste air that triggered citizen complaints. The goals of the operation were to placate residents and to prevent further complaints because the EPB lacked the ability to solve the problem of harmful air quality.

The Environmental Monitoring Station eventually concluded that four enterprises had violated regulations with the odor of their waste air: two rubber factories, a food manufacturer, and a fertilizer plant. This number was surprisingly small, given the widespread environmental violations observed during the inspections. But the bureaucrats did not seem surprised. To conclude the operation, the EPB summoned the managers of the four enterprises to its offices to complete a formal, written deposition. Three cooperated congenially during the deposition. But the fourth, the fertilizer plant owner who claimed to be illiterate during the inspection, resisted by threatening to jump out of the EPB's window on the fourth floor.[78] His ploy, however, generated little concern among the bureaucrats, who were familiar with his performatively threatening antics. According to the bureaucrats, his late father, who had previously owned the plant, also had a reputation for threatening self-defenestration without ever bringing himself to do so.

The bureaucrats' familiarity with the polluters in their jurisdiction suggests that frequent inspections had not yielded a significant downstream effect on firm behavior. For some large enterprises, the cost of electricity to run pollution abatement facilities was higher than the fine for not running them, so their rational choice was to keep paying the fines without changing their environmental behavior. After the depositions, the Laws and Regulations Office (another subsidiary of the EPB) calculated fines based on the extent of each violation: from 20,000 to 50,000 Yuan (about US$3,137 to $7,844 in 2013). These fines were modest, as the annual industrial output of these firms exceeded $1 billion.

As the last step in the process, the Petitions Office issued a formal response to each citizen petitioner, underscoring its concern about the complaint and the efforts made to address it. Each response listed the measures the EPB had taken to investigate the citizen's complaint, detailing the timing and length of the inspections, the names of the firms inspected, whether environmental violations were uncovered (usually not), and other steps the local government had taken to address pollution. The responses also included language expressing the EPB's sincere dedication to resolving pollution problems, promised a list of improve-

[78] Fu 2017 notes that factory workers sometimes use suicide threats to induce government action.

TABLE 1
CITIZEN COMPLAINT AND STATE RESPONSE

Citizen complaint	Has everyone at the EPB dropped dead? Why is no one taking care of this strong rubber smell? Taxpayers are raising a bunch of lazy animals. Are you in bed with the businesses you regulate?
State response	Greetings! Your petition was received. Our bureau's historical tracing of pollution sources in the district and our inspectors' investigation of citizen complaints found that the pungent odor affecting [District S] originates from the I. Spices Company and the C. Tires Company. [Our bureau] treats industrial air pollution as a very serious issue and is actively enforcing air pollution regulations. . . . Air pollution enforcement emphasizes resolving issues with human senses. As a result, I. Spices and C. Tires have been included as key-point enterprises in the "Three Year Plan for Air Pollution Control." . . . In addition to expediting air quality enforcement, [we] will increase the frequency of on-site inspections. We will seriously punish enterprises whose waste air violates regulations and those that do not operate waste air treatment facilities regularly. Thank you for your concern and support for our work of environmental governance!

SOURCE: Lakeville EPB website.

ments in the future, and ended by thanking the petitioner for his or her "support for our work of environmental governance" (see Table 1 for the EPB's response to a citizen complaint mentioned above).

A skeptical reader might speculate that citizens simply wanted the odor issue resolved (because some complaints mentioned odors) and that the EPB sincerely wanted to resolve those odor concerns—substantive governance. But citing strong odor as evidence of air pollution does not mean citizens only care about odor, unless we believe Chinese citizens do not care about their health. And even if the citizen complaints had just been about malodorous air, the EPB's efforts still proved futile, given the minimal punishment they imposed on the polluters. In the following twelve months, all four enterprises charged would again be found guilty of environmental violations.

Given that air quality deteriorated in Lakeville throughout my participant observation and that Chinese citizens tend to criticize their local governments much more than the central government,[79] it would be especially interesting to talk to citizens who evaluate local environmental governance in a positive light. It was impossible (and a violation of privacy) for me to interview those citizens whose petitions triggered the Foul Air Law Enforcement Operation. Still, in-depth interviews with

[79] For a critical assessment of this received wisdom, see Li 2016.

Lakeville citizens at large allowed me to ascertain two distinct narratives among those who expressed positive affirmations of local environmental governance. First, people who approved of local environmental governance often cited the state agents' good attitude (*taidu*). This suggests that demonstrating benevolent intentions helps the state gain the sympathy of citizens even when its substantive performance is visibly subpar. By lowering itself in the eyes of the citizens—sometimes acting as their virtual punching bags—the state gives citizens a sense of power and efficacy, even though it cannot resolve their problems. Second, the promissory nature of performative governance leads some citizens, especially those who live far from the sources of pollution, to expect that environmental quality will improve. For those citizens, performative governance produces an impression of government efficacy, despite the lack of substantive governance success at present.[80]

Performative Breakdown

Performative governance surely does not work all the time and on everyone, otherwise there would be no need for repression or redistribution, and there would be no petitions and protests. Although the motivation behind performative governance is to foster the impression of good governance, it is not always effective.[81] Goffman fully recognizes the prevalence of "performance disruption,"[82] and Butler is keenly interested in "performative breakdown."[83] Hence, it's worth clarifying when performative governance ceases to exist or fails to work.

Drawing on lessons from this study, there appear to be at least three ways performative governance can break down. First, it may disintegrate when actors—state agents, in this case—refuse to play their performative role. Goffman argues that some actors can be exasperated or exhausted by the need to perform, and "come to experience a special kind of alienation from self and a special kind of wariness of others."[84] Dissatisfied members of the organization may seek greener pastures in China's private sector or in a bureaucracy more powerful than the EPB,[85] without altering the underlying conditions that shape performative governance as an organizational feature.

[80] For a quantitative analysis of audience appraisal of performative governance using survey data, see Ding Forthcoming, chap. 4.

[81] It should be reiterated that from the bureaucrats' perspective, performative governance was intended to defuse short-term crises that fell upon the bureaucracy, not to generate long-term support for the regime.

[82] Goffman 1959, chaps. IV–VI.

[83] Butler 2010.

[84] Goffman 1959, 236.

[85] "Exit," according to Hirschman 1970.

Second, performative governance may subside when those same underlying conditions (low capacity and high scrutiny) change, leading the actors to other types of behavior, such as those shown in Figure 1. As its capacity expands over time, and especially since the 2018 administrative reform, China's environmental bureaucracy has tended toward a model of substantive governance. The EPB now has the authority to issue larger fines and occasionally to shut down factories. In my recent interviews with government bureaucrats, business owners, academic experts, and NGOs, the common description of the environmental bureaucracy has evolved from "the EPB is a weak bureaucracy" (as mentioned above) to "the EPB is *now* a strong bureaucracy" (*huanbao xianzai shi qiangshi bumen*).[86] But this new line is often uttered with a knowing smirk and a hint of sarcasm, suggesting that the speakers acknowledge the EPB's rising status but still ultimately dismiss it as weak.

Third, performative governance can result in a communication breakdown when it fails to convince the audience of the performer's sincerity. If citizens repeatedly engage the state and the state repeatedly delivers no substantive improvements, even the most forgiving citizen may become disenchanted.[87] Similarly, if members of the citizen-audience can readily recognize the gap between the performative and the substantive, they may reject performative governance as deceptive and demand substantive results instead. For example, performative governance cannot generally pacify environmental activists, whose attention to their cause is intense and long-lasting.

Conclusion

Machiavelli famously advised the prince that he "need not actually have all the qualities I have enumerated, but it is absolutely necessary that he seems to have them."[88] In this article, I contribute to the existing literature on theatrical performance in politics by delving beneath the level of the charismatic prince and princess to the level of their underlings. The theatrical performance of good governance is an important yet underexamined dimension of bureaucratic behavior, especially where state capacity is lacking and public scrutiny is intense.

I distinguish performative governance from the substantive satisfaction of citizen demands, arguing that what meets the eye about gov-

[86] Author interview with firm owner in Lakeville, June 8, 2018. Author interview with academic expert in Beijing, July 20, 2019. Author interview with environmental NGO employee in Beijing, July 21, 2019. Author interview with government bureaucrat in Lakeville, August 5, 2019.

[87] Gallagher 2006.

[88] Machiavelli [1532] 2008, 283.

ernment performance is more than the objective delivery of measurable goods and services. However, I do not suggest that performative and substantive governance are mutually exclusive. It is quite plausible that public relations–savvy governments or agencies would complement the substantive delivery of services with performative governance if they have the resources to achieve both. For example, they might put on a spectacle of shutting down polluters while also actually shutting them down. Disaster relief is an area where performative and substantive governance are likely to coexist.[89] In such situations, the state is under the intense scrutiny of a nervous public and must concentrate its capacity on saving lives.

Further, I do not suggest that the audience of performative governance is necessarily gullible. As Goffman relates, impression management is an iterated "information game—a potentially infinite cycle of concealment, discovery, false revelation, and rediscovery," in which "the witness is likely to have the advantage over the actor."[90] This iterated game aptly describes state-society interaction, in which neither player is naïve. The extent to which performative governance appeases critical citizens may be conditional on the information available to the audience. Its effects can also be short-lived because citizens may develop a sense of entitlement to the state's good attitude. Thus, it is not surprising that substantive governance sometimes follows performative governance, moving the political process forward as an ever-shifting punctuated equilibrium.[91]

Performative governance is not the only way of governance—not in China, and not even in the realm of environmental governance in China. Other scholars have shown the efficacy of top-down pollution-control measures, such as Beijing's recent use of inspection teams to induce local regulatory compliance,[92] the blunt-force shutdown of factories,[93] and the dramatic blanket ban on coal furnaces in northern China in winter 2017.[94] Still others have devoted valuable attention to how state and society collaborate in preserving nature[95] and developing low-carbon energy technologies.[96]

The behavior of a single bureaucracy in a single country may seem

[89] Sorace 2017.
[90] Goffman 1959, 8–9.
[91] The literature on institutional change nicely captures this evolving nature of political processes. See, e.g., Gould and Eldredge 1993; Tsai 2006; Mahoney and Thelen 2009.
[92] Karplus and Wu 2019.
[93] van der Kamp 2020.
[94] This "coal-to-gas" policy was overimplemented and later reversed.
[95] Mertha 2014.
[96] Helveston and Nahm 2019.

like a small issue, but the differential between perceived and objective qualities of government performance is not. Air pollution may have become a hot-button topic given dire warnings of "airpocalypse" in the headlines,[97] but for the longest time it was thought of as fog before it became known as smog in China and elsewhere. The time lapse between the objective urgency of a public policy issue and its perceived significance may well be decades.[98] The politics of public perception across different domains of governance warrants further research. As the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic painfully shows, the nature of an issue, its perceived importance, the objective performance of a government at tackling the issue, and its perceived efficacy can all be separate arenas of political contention.

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[97] Lim 2013.
[98] Crenson 1971.

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Acknowledgments

Previous versions of this paper were presented at the University of Alberta's Environmentalism in East Asia Conference, the Association for Asian Studies-in-Asia Conference in Kyoto, the Chinese Politics and Society Workshop at Shanghai Jiao Tong University, the Global Politics Seminar at the University of Pittsburgh, the China and the Environment in the Social Sciences Conference at the University of Vienna, the Workshop on East Asian Policymaking at Wesleyan University, the Southwest Workshop on Mixed Methods Research at UC Santa Cruz, National University of Singapore, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Tulane University, Yale University, and the Lieberthal-Rogel Center for Chinese Studies Interdisciplinary Workshop at the University of Michigan. I thank the participants of these conferences and workshops for their feedback. I appreciate the helpful comments from Barry Ames, Daniel Armanios, Daniela Donno, Stephan Haggard, Jeffrey Javed, George Krause, Xiaojun Li, Sida Liu, Daniel Mattingly, Scott Morgenstern, Ilia Murtazashvili, Jennifer Murtazashvili, Steven Oliver, Aníbal Pérez-Liñán, Ben Read, Rachel Stern, Mike Thompson-Brusstar, Denise van der Kamp, Hannah Waight, Yun Zhou, and others. I also thank three anonymous reviewers and the editors of *World Politics* for their support.

Funding

Fieldwork for this project was supported by the Desmond and Whitney Shum Fellowship from Harvard University's Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies.

Key Words

bureaucracy, China, environment, governance, performativity, pollution, the state