

From Selective Response to Consultative Governance: An Explanatory Framework for the Governance of Neighbourhood Conflict in Local Government

Jumei Wang

School of Finance and Public Administration, Anhui University of Finance and Economics,
Bengbu, Anhui, China

Abstract

In the process of modernization and transformation, the frequent occurrence of neighbourhood conflicts has posed new challenges to the construction of a modern responsive government in China. In the face of the tension between "performance pressure" and "social stability", the strategic choices of local governments in responding are characterised by differences. Theoretical studies have shown that consultative governance has become an inevitable trend in order to effectively resolve the neighbourhood avoidance complex and get out of the 'stop at the first sign of trouble' dilemma. This study uses a multi-case comparison approach to develop a typology of local government responses to neighbourhood conflicts. From selective responses to consultative governance, this study reflects a new way of thinking about democracy building in contemporary China. Consultative governance helps to enhance the ability of local governments to respond to conflicts and achieve good governance, which is an inevitable requirement for the modernisation of the governance system and the ability to govern, as well as a proper requirement for high-quality economic and social development.

Keywords

Consultative Governance; Selective Response; Neighbourhood Conflict Avoidance.

1. The Problem is Raised: The St Range Circle of Neighbourhood Avoidance that Stops as Soon as the Noise is Made

China is in the midst of a critical transition period of modernisation, and the continued development of the economy and the stability and progress of society are placing increasingly stringent demands on the efficiency of local government governance. However, the phenomenon of "neighbourhood avoidance" that has emerged in recent years has posed new challenges to local government governance, resulting in a series of neighbourhood avoidance incidents with negative externalities. The 2012 Shifang City molybdenum and copper project in Sichuan, where the local government selectively responded to information that was beneficial to it while withholding information that the public needed, led to an outbreak of mass violence, which was eventually suspended when the government promised not to build any more molybdenum and copper projects in the future. In 2007, people in Xiamen, Fujian protested against the launch of the PX project, and in 2009, people in Panyu, Guangzhou opposed the construction of a waste-to-energy incineration plant. The fate of all these major projects has been a deadly cycle of "project - protest - stop".

In the context of modernisation and transformation, the smooth handling of conflict avoidance has a real impact on the pace of modernisation and transformation. The environment in which local governments are now faced with is no longer a traditional single environment but a very diverse one, but local governments are still sticking to their old ways and adopting

"unchanging" methods of governance to deal with the difficulties they face. In the end, the result will be failure after failure and escalation of incidents. Through the study of a large number of neighbourhood group incidents, it was found that most of the neighbourhood conflicts are faced with the embarrassing situation of "stopping once the trouble is over" and are not resolved in a reasonable and efficient manner. The main reason for this is that local governments are often selective in their responses, releasing information that is favourable to them or that they want the public to know, while automatically avoiding information that is harmful and that the public really wants to know, which only deepens public resentment towards the local community and reduces public trust in the government.

In view of this, the selective response approach is not conducive to the governance of local governments, while the new consultative governance approach has been well received by local governments and the public. Through a comparative analysis of multiple cases, this paper explores the process of local governments' transition from selective response to consultative governance, and clarifies the history of local governments' response to neighbourhood conflicts, so as to help improve local governments' ability to govern and respond to neighbourhood conflicts, and contribute to the modernisation of governance system and capacity and high-quality economic and social development.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Analysis Framework

2.1. Literature Review

Based on a 'government response' perspective to study policy change due to environmental resistance, some scholars suggest that the transition from environmental resistance to policy change - that is, the emergence of new strategies - is not a blind reflex or an automatic response to something, but rather the result of interaction between various parties. The result is [1]. By constructing a 'motivation-capacity' explanatory framework to analyse the current process of government response to neighbourhood avoidance movements, Qinyan Jie found that the degree of response evolved in a convex pattern, the response subject was single, and the response strategy was mainly to stop and relocate projects, which was mainly caused by the local government's obsession with GDP and risk aversion. [2] Wang Qing argues that under the dual pressure of pressure-based institutions and social pressure, local governments' responses to social pressure have undergone a transformation from expediency to administrative absorption, with expediency being the traditional response of local governments, mainly consisting of stimulus-response responses and selective responses, while administrative absorption is the transformation of local governments' responses, characterised by administrative dominance and absorption of public opinion [3]. Weng Shihong uses the "cuckoo model" to explore the process of local government response to environmental mass events in a networked participatory environment, where local governments mostly adopt a selective response strategy due to the complexity of real-life conditions and the prerequisites for local government response, i.e. the "cuckoo model" [4]. Liu Hongbo et al. found that the government's response to public opinion is fragmented and ineffective, and studied it by constructing a theoretical framework of "motive-conditions-behaviour-result", concluding that in order to break away from the "drumming and passing flowers" among government departments The research is based on the theoretical framework of "motive-conditions-behavior-outcome", and concludes that in order to get rid of the "drumming and passing flowers" among government departments, it is necessary to promote the establishment of an accountability mechanism for public opinion responses. [5] Based on the perspective of urban governance, Sun Xiaoyi understands the differences in government responses to neighbourhood conflicts. He argues that the fit between neighbourhood issues and urban governance goals is the target driver of government response strategies, but the openness of

local governance networks and the absorptive capacity of government systems are the constraints on local government responses, and proposes that the government should respond to and eliminate neighbourhood conflicts through innovation in the decision-making process and the construction of a conflict absorption mechanism for public participation. [6]. Yang Zhijun believes that 'decisional response' is an external environmental factor in the emergence of resistance, and looks at the role of policy networks in promoting policy change from the perspective of 'decisional response' in the 'shock-response' model. In order to eliminate neighbourhood conflicts, it is necessary to actively build a consultative model of local governance and an open and orderly consensus-based public decision-making system. [7]

In summary, many studies have been conducted on the issue of neighbourhood response, and conclusions have been drawn on the need to construct accountability mechanisms for public opinion response, but they lack a holistic overview of the changes in the development process from before to after. This paper attempts to sort out an explanatory framework from selective response to consultative governance through the comparison of multiple cases.

2.2. Proposed Theoretical and Analytical Framework

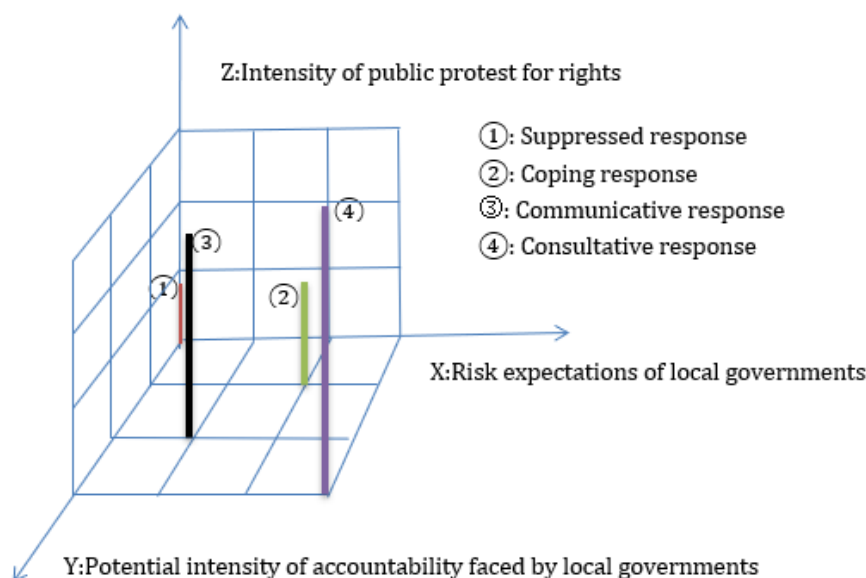


Figure 1. An explanatory framework for local government responses to neighbourhood avoidance incidents

The way local governments respond is a particular logic generated by multiple factors, which in turn leads to different ways of responding by local governments in different governance contexts. In reality, the main factors that influence the way local governments respond are the intensity of accountability that local governments may face, the risk expectations of local governments and the intensity of public resistance to their rights. There are two main types of accountability intensity, one is top-down accountability from above and the other is bottom-up accountability from the public. Risk expectation is the ability of the local government to control the development of events. The intensity of public resistance is a response to the intensity of the public's defence of their legitimate interests, which is influenced not only by the public's own literacy level, but also by the ways in which they can defend their rights. Under the influence of these three key factors, there are four types of local government response - repressive response, responsive response, communicative response and consultative response. In situations where local governments are likely to face low levels of accountability, low risk expectations and low intensity of public resistance, local governments generally choose a suppressive response. In situations where local governments are likely to face high levels of

accountability, high risk expectations and high levels of public protest, local governments generally choose a communicative response; in situations where local governments are likely to face high levels of accountability, high risk expectations and high levels of public protest, local governments choose a consultative response. Using these variables to structure these four different governance contexts, we discuss the evolution of local government responses to neighbourhood avoidance events - from selective to consultative governance - and construct an explanatory framework for local government responses to neighbourhood avoidance events as shown in Figure 1.

3. Selective Response: The Traditional Way Local Governments Respond

3.1. Case Presentation

The traditional response of local governments is selective, and according to the characteristics of the four types of local government responses summarised in Figure 1, repressive responses, coping responses and communicative responses are grouped under the category of selective responses.

3.1.1. Repressive Response

In the case of the Ningbo PX incident, for example, the decision to make the Zhenhai Refining and Chemical Integration Expansion Project, the focus of which was to include 1 million tonnes/year of PX production, was made in the context of the increased demand for PX by the Zhejiang government and Sinopec. Under the influence of the crisis of land loss and disease, and hearing the news of the relocation, villagers began to write letters and petitions one after another as well as forums to make relevant statements, but failed to attract the attention of the media and the government. Later on, about 200 villagers petitioned the district government and blocked traffic intersections. On the same day, many websites such as microblogs and newspapers reported on the people's boycott of PX, but the news was basically deleted before the evening. The Ningbo Zhenhai district government responded, stressing that 3.6 billion yuan had been invested in the project and that it was being implemented according to the strictest standards. The response failed to dispel the people's concerns, but instead intensified them, with massive demonstrations, road closures and protests, and even clashes with the police, but the government remained bent on suppressing it, and the preliminary work on the project was halted, pending scientific proof before doing so. Only then did the anti-PX incident, which developed from Zhenhai district to Ningbo city, come to an end. From the beginning to the end, the local government took a repressive stance in dealing with the anti-PX case, without taking a positive and active attitude in negotiating with the public, and the interests of the villagers in Zhenhai district were not reasonably responded to and resolved in this case, which can be said to be a "lose-lose" way of responding to a neighbourhood incident.

3.1.2. Coping Responses

In the case of Shanghai's opposition to the Hongqiao Substation, for example, a neighbourhood movement against the Hongqiao Substation was staged in the neighbourhoods around Jipu Road and Sanmen Road in Shanghai with the release of the "500KV Hongqiao Transmission Project Information Notice". Hundreds of people went to the entrance of the district to protest, demanding that the site information be made public and that the site be re-sited. Since then, residents have had several conversations with the district letter office, the power company and other relevant departments, but no consensus has been reached. In the face of the residents' queries, the Shanghai Electric Power Company cited relevant documents from the World Health Organisation to show that the substation posed no environmental risk, but the residents also found theories and research findings on the effects of high-voltage circuits on human health through relevant academic articles. The power department also claimed to have commissioned

environmental impact analyses of similar 500KV substations by professional environmental protection authorities, proving that the electromagnetic radiation from the substations all meet environmental protection requirements, but could not produce convincing concrete information and relevant data. The local government handled the matter with a coping mentality, not responding when the public did not make a fuss, but responding with rhetoric when the public made a fuss, to the extent that it was reduced to an embarrassing situation after being questioned by the public.

3.1.3. Communicative Response

For example, when the Haiyan County Government announced the construction of a waste incineration plant at Xitang Bridge, people with different views gathered in front of the Haiyan County Government and at the intersection of East and West Avenue. Some people then gathered illegally, disrupting public order and vandalising the Haiyan County Economic Development Zone Management Committee building. In addition, many people expressed their opinions through online platforms, not only exaggerating but even making inaccurate statements, which was an important reason for the further fermentation of this incident on the internet. The Haiyan County Government announced that the project would be halted, and the relevant unit staff received the people who came to cause trouble in batches, informing them of the need for the waste incineration plant construction project and the specific planning situation. Afterwards, the Haiyan County Government Information Office issued a notice in response to the incident, announcing that the site was still under discussion and that the project was an important livelihood project to solve the county's waste disposal problem and was designed to avoid the appearance of a rubbish siege. It also stated that the current technology in this area is mature and that the public will be invited to participate in the pre-project phase to ensure their right to participate and to be informed. Although the local government communicated with the public to a certain extent in this case, it was more of a one-sided indoctrination communication, without forming a posture of equal dialogue between the two sides, so the final result of the treatment was still unsatisfactory.

3.2. Reasons for Selective Response

3.2.1. Local Governments May Face Insufficient Intensity of Accountability

One important reason why local governments have adopted a selective response is that the intensity of the accountability they face is not strong enough. In the Ningbo PX case, the reason why the local government was so calm is that the villagers, despite their complaints, simply wanted to get as much for themselves as possible. For example, several neighbouring villages, such as Nanhong village, which were not included in the relocation list because they were 1,600 metres away from the project site, asked the government to relocate them all together, and then asked the government to include them in the project relocation instead of the new rural transformation after the government agreed. So as long as the local government gives them reasonable benefits, then it will not bring about major accountability problems. In the Shanghai Hongqiao substation incident, although the construction of the substation came to a standstill during the four-year-long letters and complaints from residents, the local government was not affected by accountability during this period. Even in the face of the residents' queries, the public's doubts were answered with the Jiangwan Airport Area Structure Plan, which was approved in 1995 and which was very different from the truth. If the local government had not been worried by accountability, it would not have dared to operate in such a way to deal with the public. In the case of Haiyan, Zhejiang Province, where the people opposed the waste incineration plant, they took violent actions such as gathering illegally, blocking roads and smashing public property, which seriously affected the public order, and the local government's response was rigid - asking the public security department to remove those who disobeyed the

admonition. Such a series of operations are reasonable and lawful, and naturally there is no fear of accountability.

3.2.2. Low Risk Expectations for Local Governments

In these three selective responses to the handling of neighbourhood incidents, the local governments' risk expectations all share the same characteristics - the risks are all manageable. In the Ningbo PX incident, the government, faced with a variety of reports on microblogs, forums and other online platforms, cleaned up in a very short period of time and controlled the fermenting spread of public opinion in a timely manner. In the Shanghai Hongqiao substation incident, firstly, the Hongqiao substation was submitted to the State Council for approval as early as 2000, and secondly, in June 2007, the construction unit and the environmental assessment agency published the "500KV Hongqiao Substation Project Environmental Information Notice" in Wenyi Newspaper and held a public participation evaluation meeting, these operations reduced the government's risk expectations to a certain extent. In the case of the opposition to the waste-to-energy plant in Haiyan, Zhejiang, the local government had certain risk expectations, as the gathering of the public had seriously affected public order, but this risk expectation was within the control of the local government and could be successfully resolved with the assistance of the public security department and others.

3.2.3. Insufficient Intensity of Public Resistance to Rights

Another important reason for the local government's selective response to the incident is the insufficient intensity of public resistance to defend their rights. In the Ningbo PX incident, on the one hand, because the villagers were in the countryside, their own literacy level was relatively low and their awareness of their rights was naturally weak; on the other hand, because of the backwardness of the region's technological development, there were fewer ways to defend their rights and fight. In the Shanghai Hongqiao Substation incident, the public had a certain awareness of their rights, as evidenced by their four years of persistent letters and complaints, but their low organisation and the actions taken were too scattered to facilitate the gathering of popular power. A series of operations by the local government also reduced the possibility of the public's rights defense protests. The publication of the announcement in the Wenyi Newspaper, which has a small audience, and in the lower right corner of the inconspicuous cultural news section on page 9, is suspected of circumventing public participation, and then the fact that the announcement is not published in a way that facilitates public knowledge, such as free distribution of printed materials, reduces the visibility of the information and in practice deprives the public of their right to know and participate. In the practice of the opposition to the construction of the waste-to-energy plant in Haiyan, Zhejiang, the people had their own awareness of their rights, and the public opinion expressed on the online platform, although it could cause a certain storm, could not form a certain climate due to the low organisation. In the case of the assembled protests, although the scale of the protests has grown, there is a similar lack of organisational capacity and an empty momentum that does not allow for detailed theorising with the local government on the matter of waste-to-energy plants.

4. Case Presentation

The new way of democratic response in contemporary government is consultative governance, which no longer focuses on the local government's own interests and development, but values the people's feelings, focuses on their suggestions and encourages their participation. In the case of the Jiuhua Waste Incineration Plant in Xiangtan, Hunan, the problem of waste disposal has become increasingly serious in the face of rapid economic development, and on 26 December 2013, environmental company Sander Environmental signed a concession agreement with Xiangtan City Urban Management and Administrative Law Enforcement to

address the waste disposal crisis facing Xiangtan City. It was the signing of this agreement that was the trigger for this neighbourhood conflict, but the local government has adopted a consultation-based response to manage the neighbourhood conflict.

In approving the project, the Xiangtan City Planning Bureau deemed it necessary to make its information available to the public and published the "Detailed Plan for the Construction of Xiangtan Solid Waste Comprehensive Disposal Centre" on its official website, but its issuance was met with questions from the public. In the face of increasing public skepticism, the local government did not just remain silent or suppress it, but interacted and consulted with the public. First of all, a "Notice on the situation of netizens' concern about the city's domestic waste incineration power generation project" was issued, clearly indicating that after the expiry of the public notice period for the project, the relevant departments would again organise expert discussion sessions and public hearings, and that the government would review the project in accordance with the rules and procedures after listening to all parties' systematic suggestions. At the same time, the Circular also indicates that the rumours of incomplete formalities to start the project in the early stage are unauthorized violations by the project party to start the project. The later public hearing on the siting of the project was held as scheduled, and the hearing was attended by representatives of Xiangtan citizens, units around the incineration project (e.g. Xiangtan University, Hunan University of Science and Technology, industrial enterprises, representatives of real estate enterprises), and more than 1,000 people outside the venue. The hearing ended with 19 representatives opposing the project, 3 invited experts agreeing, and 3 surrounding village leaders saying they "agree as long as the compensation is in place". At this point, the Xiangtan Municipal Government also expressed its respect for the results of the hearing and put the project on hold for the time being. Although the project was temporarily put on hold, the process was qualitatively improved and a peaceful end was reached to a consultative neighbourhood incident.

4.1. Reasons for Consultative Governance

4.1.1. High Intensity of Accountability that Local Governments May Face

The site of the waste-to-energy plant is located in the heart of the economic integration of Changzhu-Tan, with 30,000 residents of Hailing Town 1.8 km away, 33,000 students and teachers of Hunan University of Science and Technology 2.6 km away, 7,000 students and teachers of the Software Institute 3.5 km away, 960,000 residents of Xiangtan City 6 km away and 32,000 students and teachers of Xiangtan University 7 km away. It can be seen that a large proportion of those located in the vicinity are urban residents and highly intellectuals, which will put the government under greater pressure and also face a higher level of accountability compared to the rural population.

4.1.2. High Risk Expectations of Local Governments

Compared to the previous three cases, the local government's risk expectation in this case is much higher. Although there are fewer conflicts and behaviours offline, the people are more organised and most of the conflicts are concentrated on the internet, and through the rapid spread of the internet, the events ferment beyond the government's control. Secondly, many teachers and lawyers from universities have come forward to strongly accuse the project of unapproved construction and other violations. Usually these elite figures are more responsive and socially influential, and the risk expectation of the local government will skyrocket.

4.1.3. High Public Awareness of Rights Resistance

The whole process of the development of the incident shows a strong awareness of the public's rights and protests. When the news of the site selection was announced, the public generally chose to pay active attention and take legal forms to fight against the project, for example, some teachers and lawyers voiced out against the unreasonable parts of the project. After the

government released the detailed plan for the construction, the public continued to fight against the government for the unreasonable parts of the project and defend their legal rights. When the local government adopts consultative governance, the public is even more actively involved in other activities such as hearings. The public's active advocacy and protest is an important reason for local governments to adopt a consultative approach to governance.

5. Conclusion and Discussion: Why There is a Shift from Selective Response to Consultative Governance

This paper analyses the reasons for the shift from selective responses to consultative governance by local governments from a three-dimensional perspective. When the intensity of accountability and risk expectations of local governments are low, and the people's awareness of their rights and struggles is weak, they naturally do not attach much importance to neighbourhood avoidance and habitually adopt a repressive or responsive response. When local governments are expected to face increased accountability and risk, and when people's awareness of their rights and struggles increases, they will adopt a communicative approach to neighbourhood avoidance. The so-called communication is merely a symbolic and unilateral output of information in order to avoid the pressure of accountability and risk expectations, and in order to satisfy the public who have come to make trouble, with a view to a smooth resolution of the incident. However, when the intensity of accountability faced by the local government reaches a certain threshold, the risk expectation of the local government is no longer under its control, and the public's awareness of their rights and resistance is extremely high, the local government has to take the initiative to adopt a consultative approach to governance, which is a mode of actively disclosing relevant information to the public and actively inviting the public to participate in the consultation.

Through the analysis of multiple cases, it is easy to see the superiority of the local government's adoption of a consultative approach in dealing with neighbourhood conflicts, which is not only beneficial to the local government's own authority and trust, but also to the public's pursuit of a better life. The local government should pay attention to the following: firstly, when a conflict occurs, it should face it in a timely manner with a positive attitude of consultation, not administrative inaction, mutual shirking and other irresponsible phenomena, and not just suppression, which is the premise of consultation. Secondly, local governments must ensure that information is made public in a timely and transparent manner, and that the public is provided with the ideal information that is true and effective. Thirdly, local governments should learn to use a variety of consultation methods to participate in governance (e.g. holding press conferences, expert seminars, hearings, etc.), which is the key to enhancing the effectiveness of consultation. Lastly, the social influence of elites should be brought into play so that their role as directional markers in consultative governance can be effectively applied, which is a necessary condition for enhancing consultative governance.

References

- [1] Yang ZhiJun, Zhang PengJu, Environmental Resistance and Policy Change:An Integrative Literature Review, *Journal of Gansu Administrative College*,Vol.(2014) No.o5,p.12-27+127.
- [2] Jai Qinnian, A Study on the Response Process of Local Governments in China in the Neighborhood Avoidance Movement --Based on the Motivation-Competence Explanation Framework, *Journal of Yunnan Administrative College*, Vol .18(2016) No.03, p. 132-137.
- [3] Wang Qing, From Expediency to Administrative Absorption:The Transformation of the Way Local Governments Respond to Society, *China Administration*, Vol.(2015) No.06,p.77-81.
- [4] Weng Shihong, The Cuckoo Model:An Administrative Analysis of Government Response in the Maoming PX Incident, *Xuehai*, Vol.(2017) No.03, p.77-85.

- [5] Liu Hongbo, Lin Bin, Sharing or Shifting: Interdepartmental Public Opinion Response Failure and Risk Attribution, *Journal of South China University of Technology (Social Science Edition)*, Vol. 21 (2019) No.01, p.85-93.
- [6] Sun Xiaoyi, Understanding the Differentiated Model of Government Response in Neighborhood Conflict Avoidance: A Perspective Based on Urban Governance, *Chinese Administration*, Vol.(2018) No. 08, p.113-118.
- [7] Yang zhijun, Decision-Based Response: Explanations for Changes in Policy Outcomes Brought About By Urban Neighborhood Resistance, *Journal of Guangdong Administrative College*, Vol.29 (2017), No.04, p.31-38.