

Policy Mechanisms for Sustainable Consumption in China: Historical and Sociological Perspectives

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Abstract: Sustainable consumption is emerging as a vibrant international discourse and interdisciplinary research field. Both developed and developing countries need to pay attention to and understand this emerging research to enhance international dialogue and actively pursue international cooperation toward the goals of sustainable and green consumption. This paper focus specifically on the historical evolution of China's sustainable consumption policies and their operational mechanisms. The policy mechanisms discussed here encompass two dimensions: From the policy design perspective, what drives governments to implement sustainable consumption policies? From the implementation perspective, what are the effects in terms of economic, environmental, and welfare outcomes? This paper aims to examine the opportunities and challenges sustainable consumption presents for China's socioeconomic development, evaluate existing policies to some extent, and provide targeted policy recommendations. Using new energy vehicles as a case study, this paper assesses relevant sustainable consumption policies while proposing a consumer welfare policy perspective and policy suggestions.

Keywords: sustainable consumption; consumer sociology; new energy vehicles; consumer welfare.

1. Introduction

Consumption, defined as the purchase and use of material goods or services, has a significant impact on global sustainable development. On the one hand, consumption plays a vital role in enhancing people's well-being and promoting economic development. On the other hand, excessive and improper resource exploitation has led to environmental challenges such as pollution and disasters. Overconsumption and ostentatious competition also create difficulties for consumers themselves. In response to these dilemmas, the discourse on sustainable consumption (sometimes referred to as green consumption) has gained traction worldwide. In 1994, the United Nations Environment Programme released the report "Policy Factors for Sustainable Consumption" in Nairobi, which defined sustainable consumption for the first time as the provision of services and related products to meet basic human needs, enhance quality of life, while minimizing the use of natural resources and toxic materials, and minimizing the waste and pollutants generated throughout the life cycle of the service or product, thereby not compromising the needs of future generations. Based on this concept, sustainable consumption belongs to the theoretical framework of sustainable development and is its specific application in the field of consumption. Green consumption broadly encompasses three aspects: using goods that are harmless to oneself or others; avoiding environmental damage or resource waste during consumption; and engaging in ethical consumption (such as opposing animal testing and supporting fair trade with Third World countries) ^[1,2].

Contemporary China also prioritizes sustainable consumption and development. However, due to differences in national conditions, developmental stages, and cultural contexts, the practices and mechanisms for advancing sustainable consumption vary. In China, the government has played a particularly significant role in this process, which is the primary reason this paper focuses on policy mechanisms. Policy mechanisms constitute a comprehensive and integrated concept encompassing the social and historical context of policy emergence, the driving forces behind policy formulation, the intentions of policy design, the roles and functions within the policy system, the struggles and

compromises during the policy-making process, and the outcomes of policy implementation (including ecological consequences, economic benefits, consumer welfare, etc.) [3].

The policy mechanisms examined in this paper primarily focus on the driving forces behind policy formulation and the outcomes of policy implementation. The research motivation stems from three key aspects. First, within the relational framework involving markets, individuals, and enterprises, the government occupies a relatively dominant position in resource allocation, decision-making deliberation, and policy promulgation and implementation. Grasping the motivational mechanisms behind the government's introduction of relevant policies is crucial for understanding the practice of sustainable consumption in China. Second, linking sustainable consumption policies to existing policies and positioning them within the governance system facilitates a better understanding of policy mechanisms and operational dynamics. Third, connecting policy design with implementation outcomes enables analysis of policy strengths and weaknesses, thereby informing more effective policy recommendations.

2. The History of China's Sustainable Development Policies

In recent years, resource-intensive industrial development models have hindered further economic growth and improvements in people's well-being. China has consequently elevated ecological civilization construction, environmental sustainability, and green consumption to the government's agenda. Overall, the practice of sustainable development and sustainable consumption in China primarily unfolds across two levels: conceptual development and strategic deployment. Chronologically, these two levels both follow a sequential timeline and partially overlap. They are fundamentally mutually reinforcing: as strategic deployment advances, conceptual development deepens, while strategic deployment itself evolves under the guidance of conceptual frameworks.

In practical implementation, the Chinese government has gradually recognized that sustainable development is not only tied to energy conservation, emissions reduction, resource recycling, and ecological protection in the production sector, but also significantly influenced by consumption and consumers. First, consumption's guiding role in production facilitates industrial upgrading and technological innovation. Second, cultivating consumers' knowledge and sense of responsibility also contributes to environmental protection and deepens ecological civilization construction. Consequently, sustainable development policies have expanded from the production sphere to encompass green consumption and low-carbon consumption. Moreover, the government's exemplary role in energy conservation and environmental protection holds greater significance for sustainable development than mere advocacy. In recent years, relevant policies have evolved into an energy-saving revolution encompassing government departments, public domains, and infrastructure.

3. Driving Factors of China's Sustainable Development Policy

China has thus far established a preliminary policy framework for sustainable development and sustainable consumption, spanning from conceptual development to strategic planning and encompassing both production and consumption sectors. What drives the formulation and implementation of these policies? Beyond the obvious pressures of environmental pollution and international trends, sustainable development holds far greater significance for China's economic and social progress, rendering its driving mechanisms complex. This paper will systematically analyze the driving mechanisms of sustainable development and sustainable consumption policies from the dimensions of production, institutions, and consumption. This analysis aims to enhance our understanding of how these policies function and their significance for China's development.

3.1. From the production perspective

Sustainable development can provide new drivers for economic growth. Currently, China's economic growth rate is slowing, and adjusting industrial structures while promoting innovation and upgrading are essential for sustained and healthy economic development. Sustainable development offers new directions and requirements for technological innovation and industrial upgrading. Emerging industries such as the information technology sector, wind power generation, and new energy vehicles are thriving under the framework of sustainable development, creating fresh opportunities for economic growth. China possesses abundant renewable resources like wind and solar energy. Its vast consumer market can drive the commercialization and commoditization of green innovations. A strong government can spur investment in green innovation and industrialization. A relatively complete industrial chain and solid industrial foundation facilitate the industrialization of innovative technologies. Effectively leveraging these resources and conditions holds promise for significantly enhancing the international competitiveness of China's green technologies and industries, accelerating the green economic transition, and achieving the goals of ecological civilization.

Beyond industrial upgrading and innovation-driven growth, sustainable consumption (green consumption) has cultivated new growth points for domestic demand, helping to expand consumption and drive economic growth. People are increasingly willing to invest time and money in organic food and green lifestyles to enhance their quality of life. Middle-class consumers are willing to spend more on safe, high-quality, green, and healthy food, reflecting significant potential in green food consumption among this demographic. This trend also places higher demands on upgrading China's food industry and improving food safety standards ^[4].

3.2. From the institutional perspective

Sustainable development offers a legitimate opportunity for reform. Environmental crises such as air pollution and ecological degradation have caused significant distress in people's lives, even triggering large-scale mass incidents that greatly undermine social stability. Environmental issues also tarnish China's international image, undermining its credibility as a responsible global power. While reforms to income distribution and social welfare systems may be contentious, reforms dedicated to environmental governance and sustainable development are indisputably legitimate and carry greater legitimacy. Seizing the opportunity presented by sustainable development can effectively drive institutional reforms, establish more comprehensive systems and legal frameworks, and advance the practice of governing the country according to law. Specifically, the institutional reform opportunities offered by sustainable development manifest primarily in the following three aspects.

Firstly, it provides a favorable opportunity for systematic institutional design. It improves the relationship of interests among central and local governments, among local governments, and among government departments in natural resource management and environmental protection under the existing institutional framework, forming a win-win situation with clearly defined responsibilities and complementary promotion.

Secondly, it lays the groundwork for establishing a multi-stakeholder framework for public affairs management. Practice demonstrates that collaborative governance between government and the public is the effective path to addressing environmental challenges. The middle class, characterized by higher education levels and social status, exhibits greater concern for environmental issues and is more likely to engage with environmental organizations through governance practices. This can drive the establishment of mechanisms for public voice expression and institutional safeguards for public participation in public affairs management, thereby reforming the governance model for public affairs ^[5,6].

Thirdly, it provides a favorable opportunity for tax reform. By integrating reforms such as the business tax and consumption tax adjustments, we can redefine revenue sharing between central and local governments. This will reduce local fiscal dependence on energy-intensive and polluting industries, encourage enterprises to adopt renewable energy and develop energy-efficient green

products, and incentivize consumers toward eco-friendly purchasing habits. Seizing the momentum of sustainable development, we can foster a more resilient and efficient tax system.

3.3. From the consumption perspective

The concept of sustainable consumption helps shape a sustainable lifestyle, which is particularly crucial during the early stages of a consumption revolution. The logic of this consumption culture-seeking comfort and pleasure through the purchase and use of material goods or services—is spreading across contemporary China, gradually igniting a consumption revolution. However, while enhancing living standards and driving economic growth, we also observe adverse consequences of this consumption revolution, such as environmental pollution, excessive consumption, and resource waste. Therefore, advocating sustainable consumption principles and cultivating sustainable lifestyles at an early stage is imperative for a nation of 1.4 billion people like China. This holds significant importance for the rational development and utilization of resources, as well as for promoting the sustainable development of our economy and society.

A sustainable lifestyle involves pursuing the comfort and enjoyment derived from consumption while paying attention to ecological conservation. Green living initiatives were widely promoted to accelerate nationwide shifts toward thrift, green and low-carbon practices, and civilized, healthy habits in clothing, food, housing, transportation, and leisure. All forms of extravagance, waste, and irrational consumption were resolutely opposed. The connotations of green consumption was expanded and integrated it with traditional cultural ethics, making sustainable lifestyles actionable. Furthermore, consumption exerts elastic influence on production. Against the backdrop of a consumption revolution, consumer demand plays a guiding—even decisive—role in production. Thus, sustainable consumption and lifestyles help steer manufacturers toward rational resource utilization and the development of green, energy-efficient products ^[7].

However, we must clearly recognize that the formation of sustainable lifestyles does not solely depend on consumer agency. While consumer sovereignty is the dominant model in Western consumer sociology theory, overemphasizing it not only hinders the promotion of sustainable consumption but also undermines its legitimacy. On one hand, consumers occupy the terminal end of the entire consumption chain, preceded by production, distribution, transportation, and other stages. Beyond consumers bearing responsibility for green consumption, governments must shoulder public management and infrastructure development, enterprises must assume responsibility for production and innovation, and markets must fulfill their role in expanding channels and fostering competition. On the other hand, the legitimacy of sustainable consumption fundamentally lies in environmental governance and ecological protection. Yet, viewed through the lens of consumer sovereignty, questions arise: Why should people inconvenience themselves by shifting toward sustainable consumption? Should the value of environmental protection alone diminish the freedom of consumer choice? By pitting consumer sovereignty against the transition to sustainable consumption, this perspective undermines the legitimacy of sustainable consumption.

An increasing number of sociologists have proposed an alternative approach. Rather than solely emphasizing individual education levels or ethical transformations, they contend that habits and routines represent relatively stable forms of human practice. Understanding these internal mechanisms is essential for fostering sustainable lifestyles. Drawing from behavioral economics and practice theory, Warde (2013) argues that behavioral interventions should focus more on the social organization and infrastructure underpinning specific behaviors. Southerton (2013) systematically conceptualized this intervention model, emphasizing the temporal conditionality of everyday actions. He proposed three crucial temporal concepts for understanding practical behavior: (1) Time is a resource, (2) Everyday actions incur time costs, and (3) Different behaviors operate at distinct temporal rhythms. To cultivate sustainable consumer lifestyles, attention must be paid to the interplay among practice, temporality, and diverse forms of action. The following section applies this perspective to the case of new energy vehicles ^[8,9].

4. Case Study: Policy Mechanisms for New Energy Vehicles

The preceding discussion examined the evolution of China's sustainable consumption policies and the underlying driving mechanisms, revealing the socioeconomic development opportunities offered by sustainable consumption from the perspectives of production, institutions, and consumption. However, reality falls short of this ideal. This section uses new energy vehicles as a case study to reflect on the policy mechanisms for sustainable consumption, evaluate existing new energy vehicle promotion policies, and propose policy recommendations.

Whether private car owners in Shanghai, who generally have stronger economic capabilities, or private car owners in Beijing, whose economic capabilities and automotive needs vary significantly, price is not the primary consideration in automotive consumption. Consequently, while fiscal subsidies for new energy vehicles have achieved some success, they have failed to endure over time, have not effectively boosted consumer acceptance, and simultaneously place substantial pressure on fiscal expenditures. Overall, existing new energy vehicle promotion policies suffer from three primary issues. Firstly, they focus narrowly on purchase costs while neglecting the entire ownership and usage lifecycle. Secondly, they emphasize abstract concepts like sustainability and environmental conservation at the expense of addressing consumers' daily needs and tangible benefits. Thirdly, they place excessive emphasis on consumer agency while overlooking historical and cultural contexts, systemic policy design, and infrastructure development and maintenance.

From the perspective of practice theory, people's consumption and taste are embedded within the habitus of everyday life. They can only be understood by integrating consumers' participation in social practices and specific social texts. As mentioned earlier, Warde particularly emphasizes infrastructure and social organization, while Southerton highlights the temporal conditionality of actions. These perspectives are reflected in the interviews. Unlike other expressive or status-display theories, this approach centers on the needs of the consumer subject. It examines how consumption organizes individuals' daily lives, how it delivers comfort and pleasure, and how individuals fulfill family responsibilities through consumption. Essentially, it underscores that the purpose of consumption lies in enhancing consumer welfare.

Based on the aforementioned research findings and practical theories, this study proposes a policy perspective on consumer welfare, focusing on both subjective and objective consumer welfare to promote sustainable consumption. Taking new energy vehicles as an example, the consumer welfare perspective can be operationalized by enhancing sustainability through increased consumer mobility. Regardless of vehicle type, the ultimate imperative is to elevate consumers' mobility. The promotion of new energy vehicles requires systematic planning rather than merely promoting new energy private cars. Beyond constructing related infrastructure and advancing technological R&D, this paper primarily offers policy recommendations.

Firstly, the government should focus on improving the public transportation system to reduce congestion caused by private vehicles during peak hours. Increase and rationally plan public transportation routes, enhance public transit facilities in areas with high pedestrian traffic—such as buses, short-distance shuttle buses, and public bicycles—to improve the operational efficiency of public transportation.

Secondly, leverage technologies like mobile applications to facilitate trip planning and reduce the time cost of using public transit. Expand the coverage of new energy vehicles in the public domain, including electric buses, electric taxis, electric bicycles, and new energy government vehicles. This approach not only promotes environmental protection and energy conservation but also serves as a model for the public.

Thirdly, promote environmentally friendly and energy-efficient modes of transportation, and regulate the use of electric bicycles. Consumers tend to choose electric bicycles for daily short trips such as picking up children or grocery shopping, as they offer smooth riding and convenient parking. While electric bicycles are inherently eco-friendly and energy-efficient consumer goods, they currently pose

potential hazards that threaten automobiles, bicycles, pedestrians, and even the riders themselves. Therefore, while promoting this new energy transportation option, the government should also regulate the management of electric bicycles.

5. Conclusion

Research indicates that sustainable consumption and sustainable development, as an international and emerging discourse system, present development opportunities for China's economic growth, institutional reform, and consumer education. China has preliminarily established a policy framework for sustainable development and sustainable consumption, spanning conceptual development to strategic planning and encompassing both production and consumption sectors. However, tensions persist among relevant stakeholders, between central and local governments, across different government departments, and between government and consumers, necessitating institutional reforms to foster collaborative space. Taking new energy vehicle promotion policies as an example, a gap exists between policy design intentions and implementation outcomes. While the government focuses on fiscal subsidies, consumers prioritize factors such as infrastructure, safety assurances, and time efficiency—elements that enhance convenience, comfort, and reliability during the consumption process—rather than price as the primary concern. Based on this analysis, this paper proposes a consumer welfare perspective, arguing that consumption aims to enhance consumer welfare. It advocates promoting sustainable consumption by improving both subjective and objective consumer welfare.

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