

Nuclear power plant expansion and growth coalition in China

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2016 marks the 5th anniversary of Fukushima nuclear accident, and 30 years since the Chernobyl accident. After these accidents, many countries either cancelled or delayed their nuclear power development due to safety concerns. However, for almost every country in East Asia, instead of taking a lesson from the Fukushima accident, even expanded their nuclear capacity. China for example, is going to build more than 100 Nuclear Power Plants (NPPs) within the next 50 years. In this article, I will argue that this nuclear expansion policy in China is the result of the “growth coalition”.

Growth coalition means a group of people and organizations that are interested in the economic development of city. They link parochial settings with cosmopolitan interests, making places safe for development. Local government became an economic-development state which pursued developmental policies as the top of local government agenda. Logan and Molotch (1987) suggest “growth coalition” theory, which originates in 1960s US urban studies, can be used to study the politics of the entrepreneurial cities. In China, as the communist government has moved from a planned economic system towards a more open market economy, we have also witnessed the attempt to garner more benefits from the land-use fee. Zhu (1999) states that “the state is giving up its philosophy of class struggle and proletariat dictatorship, and gradually letting markets take responsibility for the provision of goods to its citizens.” The growth coalition often sees the infrastructural investment as the greatest opportunity to develop the city. As many infrastructural investments, the nuclear power plant also became part of this ‘boosterism’ and a way of increasing development.

Like in other countries, Nuclear power in China was originally introduced as a military project in 1953, and the later commercial nuclear program formally began in 1972. The first Chinese-designed-Nuclear Power Plant went into construction in 1985. Since 1991, the Chinese government has completed 30 reactors in five different provinces, and 23 more reactors are currently under construction. In 2011 however, this seemingly boundless nuclear expansionism met a new challenge—the Fukushima accident.

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After the Fukushima accident in March 2011, the State Council announced five days later that new approvals [for future nuclear power plants will be suspended](#) with the introduction of comprehensive safety tests of all nuclear projects. This was the de jure statement from the government, but the de facto reality was rather different. In fact, some reactors that were already in operation simply continued as normal, and the construction of approved projects continued unabated. After 19 months, Beijing officially lifted the freeze on new nuclear projects, immediately after the approval of a Five-Year Nuclear Safety Plan. Again, China's vigorous path towards nuclear growth was back on track.

Many think that the policy making in China is a “top-down” process. However, some scholars argue that the Chinese policy making system is a “fragmented authority” that includes many agencies such as the government official, the company, and the research institute (Lieberthal & Oksenberg 1987 Xu 2008 Zhou et al. 2011). The three Nuclear companies (China National Nuclear Corporation, China General Nuclear Corporation, State Power Investment Company) select the location of the next Nuclear Power Plant, and apply to the State Council before the construction. Local politics can affect this selection process and local governments are often eager to have Nuclear Power Plant projects. For example, all of the coastal provinces in China have applied for a nuclear power project. Guangdong province, which is located in the southern part of China, is the biggest nuclear area in the country. The region already has nine reactors in operation and five under construction. It is obvious that the local government sees Nuclear Power Plant projects as a growth policy. It can also be witnessed in the diary of Li Peng, who was the Prime Minister of China in 1980s.

At the level of citizenship however, the Fukushima accident has had most impact. In terms of popular opinion, the effect of Fukushima accident was crucial. Right after the accident, Chinese consumers bought iodized salt from supermarkets in an attempt to prevent radiation-related illnesses. As the statistics from WIN-Gallup International (2011) shows, the Chinese citizens in favour of nuclear power declined by 13% after the accident. In late 2012, four retired government employees from Wangjiang county, Anhui province, wrote open letter to the State Council, pointing out the risks that Nuclear Power Plant projects might bring to the county. The employees were political elites in Wangjiang, which could be the original growth coalition (local government).

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Also, in Jiangmen, Guangdong province, over a thousand people paraded the main street in front of the city government. The protestors were opposed to the local

government's decision to build a nuclear fuel station, with some raising placards reading: "Give us back our green homeland", "NO nuclear pollution", "I need life, not GDP", and "I need a child, not an Atom".



Anti-nuclear protestors Jiangmen, some hold placards reading "Give us back our green homeland", "NO nuclear pollution" and "I need a child, not an Atom".

The protest showed the change of the growth coalition. I went to Jiangmen city for field work to understand the background of the growth coalition in the protest. The protesters used Social Network Services to disseminate their fears about nuclear fuel. What I heard from Jiangmen citizens astonished me: that Chinese expatriates, who are the biggest investors in Jiangmen city, sent a petition to Guangdong government to not build the nuclear fuel station. Jiangmen is famous for its population of overseas Chinese, and many of them live in Macau, Hong kong, and in America. Some of them even put an advertisement with title of 'NO nuclear fuel station in Jiangmen' in the [Macau times](#). It affected public opinion and over a thousand people gathered to oppose the nuclear project.

Clearly, the opposition of the growth coalition is a much more powerful lobby than many other groups. They could use their financial power to change the political path, and could even utilise the media to spread their discourse. And by doing so they made change. That is to say, the local politics in China will not be the same as before the

Fukushima accident. This change can make the Chinese system more complex, and perhaps even more democratic. It needs further research to see if this change of the growth coalition can be implicated in other places in China. Still, it can give us insight into the idea that the Chinese government is being forced to deal with “anti-nuclear” growth coalitions.

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