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ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# Coping With Competing Institutional Logics in Policy Implementation

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## ABSTRACT

While recent research has studied the coping behaviors of street-level bureaucrats (SLBs), less attention has been paid to the institutional antecedents of these coping behaviors. This paper examines how macro-level institutional factors—specifically, competing institutional logics—shape SLBs' meso-level organizational conflicts and micro-level coping behaviors. We use semi-structured interviews and archival data to investigate environmental policy implementation in China, where developmental state logic and regulatory state logic coexist and compete. We found that regulatory state logic increases SLBs' workloads and accountability, while developmental state logic limits their power and resources. These competing institutional logics result in unclear responsibilities, expanding the number of tasks but constraining resources, creating pressure for enforcement officials while providing few rewards. In response, SLBs engage in active and passive coping behaviors. Our study contributes to public administration and institutional theory research by introducing a multi-level framework that links competing logics to organizational conflicts and individual coping.

## 1 | Introduction

In democratic and authoritarian countries, street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) often encounter multiple and inconsistent expectations during policy implementation, leading to psychological strain and coping behaviors (Du and Yi 2022; Fowler 2021; N. Liu et al. 2022; Zhan et al. 2014). Coping behaviors are defined as “behavioral efforts frontline workers employ when interacting with clients to master, tolerate, or reduce external and internal demands and conflicts they face on an everyday basis” (Tummers et al. 2015, 1100). Existing research identifies several factors influencing coping behaviors, such as policy ambiguities, temporary organizational structures, and SLBs' identities (Jensen et al. 2018; Thomann et al. 2016). However, the challenges faced by organizations and their members extend beyond these individual and structural factors, thereby requiring a

broader, multi-level perspective (Wu et al. 2023; F. Zhang and Welch 2023).

The institutional logics perspective offers ways to understand how SLBs navigate conflicting demands in their work environments when implementing public policies (R. E. Meyer et al. 2014; Thornton et al. 2012). Institutional logics provide “frames of reference that condition actors' choices for sense-making, the vocabulary they use to motivate action, and their sense of self and identity” (Thornton et al. 2012, 2). Individuals and organizations whose actions lie at the intersection of multiple competing logics face contradictory demands (Grossi et al. 2020; Pache and Santos 2013). While prior works tended to focus on a macro level (society or field) or a meso level (organization), recent works have aimed to explore micro-level individual practices (McPherson and Sauder 2013; Zilber 2024).

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Taking a multi-level analytical approach to competing institutional logics involving macro-, meso-, and micro-levels is important because policy implementation involves multi-level systems where the environment and individual actors work together so that the meso-level organization of implementation does not depend on unchanging structural elements (Sandfort and Moulton 2020).

Macro-level institutional logics are often shaped by regulatory reforms and leadership turnover. In democratic and in authoritarian countries, new governmental leaders often introduce reforms that embody new institutional logics, reflecting shifts in the state's priorities. These reforms and leadership turnover frequently create inconsistencies in laws and policies, as implementers are left to reconcile how the new institutional logic aligns or conflicts with the existing one (Eaton and Kostka 2014). At the meso level, organizations often impose conflicting requirements on their members (F. Zhang and Welch 2023). However, the connection between macro-level institutional logics and meso-level organizational conflicts and their impact on micro-level coping behaviors remains unclear (R. E. Meyer et al. 2014).

Responding to the call for further research on the micro-level dynamics of institutional logics (McPherson and Sauder 2013; Zilber 2024) and recognizing that logics translate into practice beyond a mere symbolic dimension (Smets et al. 2017), we investigate the on-the-ground coping behaviors of SLBs facing conflicting expectations. This paper poses the following research question: How precisely do macro-level competing institutional logics lead to the meso-level conflicts and micro-level coping behaviors of SLBs?

In this research, we examined SLBs in China's environmental protection bureaus (EPBs), regulatory agencies adhering to a strong developmental state logic. China is a particularly well-suited context for this study. On the one hand, along with China's efforts to strengthen the enforcement of environmental laws and regulations in recent years, an emerging literature has applied mainstream theories and models of public organizations and policy implementation developed from western countries in the study of environmental policy implementation in China (Chen and Jia 2023; Du and Yi 2022; N. Liu et al. 2022; Zhan et al. 2014). Research has found that regardless of the differences in political regimes, the constraints and pressures faced by SLBs in China are similar to those faced by their western counterparts who are under pressures to cope with resource constraints, vague policies, and conflicting priorities (Michel et al. 2022; Tiggelaar et al. 2023). On the other hand, China shares characteristics with other developing countries in terms of prioritizing economic development while gradually incorporating environmental regulations (Ran 2013, 2017). These shared features make China an insightful case for extending the study of SLBs into a context with competing institutional logics, as it provides an alternative perspective on how bureaucrats balance competing demands under distinct political arrangements.

We start by investigating competing institutional logics and their impact on policy implementation at the macro level. We use meso-level lenses to explore the challenges that organizations face when navigating conflicting institutional demands.

Next, at a micro level, we look at how organizational members—the SLBs—use coping behaviors to handle competing institutional logics. We then introduce the specific logics at play in our study—Regulatory State Logic and Developmental State Logic—and define how these logics manifest in the context of environmental policy implementation. After introducing the data and method, we provide detailed findings about the interplay between macro-level institutional logics, meso-level organization conflicts, and micro-level coping behaviors. We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings to the literature on institutional logics and policy implementation and suggesting the directions for future research.

## 2 | Theory and the Research Context

Institutional logics are generally understood as sets of beliefs, values, and norms that shape actors' understanding of their environment and guide their attention and behaviors (Thornton et al. 2012). Within a focal institutional sphere, logics define which means and goals are considered legitimate. Institutional logics originate from macro-level institutional spheres, such as the state, the market, corporations, professions, the family, or religions (Thornton and Ocasio 1999; Thornton et al. 2012). Logics also play a role at the organizational or meso level (F. Zhang and Welch 2023). Institutional logics become competitive when actors grapple with conflicting sets of beliefs, values, and norms, resulting in contradictory guidelines for action (Yan et al. 2021). Competing institutional logics drive institutional change, leading to shifts in attention, practices, beliefs, or terminology (Reay and Hinings 2009; Thornton 2002). However, the effects of competing institutional logics on public sector organizations or policy implementation need more attention (Michel et al. 2022; X. Wang et al. 2024; F. Zhang and Welch 2023).

### 2.1 | Coping With Competing Institutional Logics in Policy Implementation

In the domain of policy implementation, bureaucrats may encounter conflicts between logics (Reay and Hinings 2009). Competing institutional logics influence policy processes and policy enforcement actors. First, during the policy-making process, legislators must balance demands from different institutional logics and powerful actors (A. Wang 2013) to gain legitimacy, sometimes at the expense of efficiency and other practical considerations (J. W. Meyer and Rowan 1977; Ran 2013). In his seminal article on policy implementation, Matland (1995) pointed out that the incompatibility of goals and values is a significant factor in organizational conflicts. Second, competing institutional logics significantly affect policy enforcement actors. Michel et al. (2022) highlight that competing institutional logics influence participants in policy implementation by reshaping their understanding of their roles. Thomann et al. (2016) studied how policy implementation by private actors was disrupted by state logic and market logic. While previous literature provides evidence of the influence of competing institutional logics in policy implementation, we discuss the micro-level paths through which the state influences

policy implementation in the presence of contradictions between the logics of regulation and development.

Research has examined how organizations respond to competing institutional logics (Pache and Santos 2013; Smets et al. 2015). Previous studies emphasized that public sector strategies are not merely decoupling or compromising; they constantly adjust based on political judgments that shift with the central government's attitude and the clarity of objectives (Zhou et al. 2013). Clarity and certainty in central government objectives significantly influence local government actions (Lo et al. 2019). Local governments ignore some environmental laws, especially those formulated in general and vague terms. In contrast, local governments have strong motivations to respond to ambiguous policy statements with veto power<sup>1</sup> (Chan and Gao 2008). In their study of how hybrid organizations navigate institutional logics in public administration, Skelcher and Smith (2015) observe that organizations may *assimilate* a new logic by selectively incorporating its elements while remaining loyal to the dominant logic or by *blending* the logics to create an integrated form. However, organizations may also become *blocked* when “the inherent tensions between logics cannot be resolved or managed, leading to organizational dysfunction” (Skelcher and Smith 2015, 442). In our study, we argue that avoiding organizational blocking requires a better understanding of the micro-level paths through which competing institutional logics affect bureaucrats' coping behaviors.

In democratic and authoritarian regimes, SLBs need to exercise discretion and operate in ambiguous environments where they must interpret policies and adapt them to local circumstances (Fowler 2023; Zang 2017; Zhan et al. 2014). For frontline enforcement officials, competing institutional logics create conflicting requirements that increase the ambiguity and difficulty of their jobs. Enforcement officials have a certain degree of discretion. They inevitably exercise discretion in their work, as they interpret and apply ambiguous or contradictory rules in policy implementation (Hupe and Hill 2007). As top-level decisions may sometimes be vague or inconsistent” (Lieberthal and Lampton 2018, 21), enforcement officials face a choice between the “politically acceptable” and the “administratively feasible” (Nalbandian 2006). In addition, institutional logic influences how SLBs interpret their roles, their discretion, and the success of their policy implementation (Sager and Gofen 2022).

Prior studies have noted the coping behaviors associated with political and policy characteristics; meso-level structural features and organizational actions; and individual elements, such as stress, pay satisfaction, mission attachment, and trust (Davidovitz and Cohen 2022; Fowler 2021; N. Liu et al. 2022; Tiggelaar et al. 2023; Xiao et al. 2024). Recent calls from scholars have stressed the importance of examining how competing institutional logics affect actors at multiple levels (Wu et al. 2023) and of a practice-driven “on-the-ground” approach to studying institutional logics to understand the individual-level coping of competing institutional logics (Garrow and Grusky 2013; McPherson and Sauder 2013).

Studying individual-level coping behaviors involves examining the attitudes and personal motivations involved in adopting these behaviors (Davidovitz and Cohen 2022; Tummers

et al. 2015). Hobfoll et al. (1994) emphasize the active and passive dimensions of coping strategies. Active coping is defined as people using their own resources and adopting proactive behaviors to cope with problems and stress (Wood and Bhatnagar 2015). Passive coping is a maladaptive strategy that can often be associated with helplessness, deferral, and retreat (Nielsen and Knardahl 2014). Previous studies have explored SLBs' coping behaviors in response to “external and internal demands” (Tummers et al. 2015, 1100). Active or passive coping behaviors can be coping strategies for different SLBs and can have different personal and organizational impacts. In line with this approach, our study specifically explores the micro-level active coping behaviors and passive coping behaviors arising from competing institutional logics.

## 2.2 | Regulatory State Logic and Developmental State Logic

Our research discusses the two competing institutional logics that are widespread in developing and authoritarian countries, namely regulatory state logic and developmental state logic. In recent years, China has aimed to rebuild its regulatory systems by following western models of regulatory state (Yasuda 2021). Regulatory state in democratic settings is characterized by regulatory autonomy, strong legal frameworks, and reliance on rules-based enforcement. However, regulators in authoritarian regimes such as China often lack institutional autonomy, face significant political interference, and must address enforcement difficulties while operating in fragmented and restrictive settings (Majone 2019; Yasuda 2021). In recent years, China's environmental protection agency has improved its regulatory authority and reputation by collaborating with other governmental agencies in decision-making, building cooperation with industries, and engaging NGOs in policy making (Yasuda 2021; Zhan and Tang 2013). In this regard, the regulatory state has become a key institutional logic shaping the operation of environmental protection in China. That said, SLBs in China have long faced the trade-off between developmental state logic and regulatory state logic, particularly in contested policy areas, such as food safety, financial regulations, and environmental protection (L. Wang et al. 2023; Yang and Zhao 2023; Yasuda 2021). They need to make political calculations based on government priorities, even when provided with clear environmental directives (Nalbandian 2006; Zhou et al. 2013).

In contrast, developmental state logic implies that a country is development oriented and emphasizes economic advancement (Woo-Cumings 2019). Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the two competing logics of regulatory state and developmental state, drawing upon the key dimensions of institutional logics depicted in Thornton et al. (2012). Aligned with the institutional logics framework, our analysis highlights the competing logics by examining how they shape the sources of identity, legitimacy, authority, their influence on the organizational bases of missions, organizational bases of attention, the formal and informal mechanisms of control (Thornton et al. 2012). Our analysis aims to clarify how these logics create tension in policy implementation by imposing different pressures on local officials.

**TABLE 1** | Identifying the competing institutional logics.

Characteristics	Regulatory state logic	Developmental state logic
Sources of identity	Law enforcement official role	Economic development role
Sources of legitimacy	Post-growth legitimacy	Performance-based legitimacy
Sources of authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Central government</li> <li>• Public opinion</li> <li>• International pressure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Central government</li> <li>• Public opinion</li> <li>• Business community</li> </ul>
Basis of mission	Protecting sustainable development such as environment protection	Promoting economic development
Basis of attention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Governmental target in controlling pollution levels</li> <li>• Environmental costs</li> <li>• Wellbeing of the population</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Governmental target in terms of economic growth</li> <li>• Economic costs</li> <li>• Prosperity of the population and of the business actors</li> </ul>
Formal mechanisms of control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear Key Performance Indicator (KPI) from central government</li> <li>• Top-down instructions such as Inspection of Ecological and Environmental Protection</li> <li>• Campaign-style enforcement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear KPI from central government</li> <li>• Incentive and promotion of officials</li> </ul>
Informal mechanisms of control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attention paid by governmental leaders and the population</li> <li>• Pressure from NGOs and public media</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attention paid by governmental leaders</li> <li>• Pressure from business sectors and local employment</li> <li>• Fiscal revenues affected</li> </ul>

Law enforcement SLBs are traditionally embedded in regulatory state logic. Their identity is derived from their role as enforcers of rules, their focus on upholding laws, and their need to ensure compliance and to protect public welfare. In contrast, developmental state logic defines bureaucrats by their role in promoting economic growth and supporting business interests, often prioritizing the economy over strict regulatory enforcement. Regulatory state logic is rooted in a post-growth perspective; it emphasizes well-being and social welfare (Moran 2002). In contrast, developmental state logic bases legitimacy on performance-driven metrics, such as economic growth, job creation, and industrial expansion, prioritizing economic achievements over regulatory enforcement and compliance.

The sources of authority also differ. Under regulatory state logic, authority is derived from central government, public opinion, and international pressures that demand regulatory compliance and environmental standards. In contrast, developmental state logic also draws authority from central government but is strongly influenced by the local business community, which often advocates for regulatory flexibility to promote economic activity.

The mission of bureaucrats under regulatory state logic focuses on sustainable development, enforcing policies to ensure regulatory compliance. Developmental state logic, however, prioritizes rapid industrialization and economic development, facilitating business growth and minimizing regulatory barriers. Regulatory state logic directs bureaucrats' attention toward achieving environmental goals, such as controlling pollution

and improving public health. In contrast, developmental state logic focuses on economic growth targets and business-friendly policies.

The mechanisms of control also vary significantly. Regulatory state logic relies on formal top-down instructions, such as campaign-style enforcement and key performance indicators set by the central government. As discussions about the regulatory state evolve, some scholars have recognized the importance of including informal control mechanisms, such as NGO pressure and public participation, further reinforcing compliance (Majone 2019). However, developmental state logic incentivizes economic performance through rewards for achieving business growth and investment targets. Informal mechanisms of control are driven by pressure from the local business sector and fiscal revenue considerations, encouraging bureaucrats to prioritize economic development over strict regulatory enforcement.

We expect regulatory and developmental state logics to be conflicting because the challenge of balancing economic development and environmental regulation persists in developing countries (Chen and Jia 2023). The economic growth of developing countries is based on the inefficient use of resources, and these countries have paid a heavy environmental price for their rapid expansion. In addition, in developing countries, the success of public officials in promoting economic development can improve their chances of promotion. The construction of the regulatory state is closely related to bureaucratic competition (Yasuda 2021). Bureaucrats prioritize short-term, measurable development outputs over environmental protection,

because fully enforcing environmental protection regulations requires sustained and substantial investments for little immediate payoff (Economy 2014). This competition-driven system emphasizes visible, short-term achievements, such as economic development goals, neglecting less visible or longer-term environmental protection projects (Liang and Langbein 2015).

### 2.3 | Competing Institutional Logics and China's Environmental Policy Implementation

We investigate environmental policy implementation in China, where regulatory state logic and developmental state logic are both influential. First, China operates under a fragmented authoritarian political system characterized by a combination of economic decentralization and centralized power structures (Lieberthal and Lampton 2018). This fragmentation contributes to conflicting institutional demands in two key ways. First, the central government and local governments may have different goals and priorities. Second, the fragmented system allows local governments to comply symbolically with central government directives while exercising discretion to bargain or adapt policies during implementation.

Second, the Chinese government has been in a transition phase of rebuilding its legitimacy by balancing the demands for environmental regulation and economic development (Yang and Zhao 2023). Initially rooted in ideologies such as Marxism-Leninism, charismatic leaders like Mao Zedong, and nationalism based on the victory in the Sino-Japanese War (Holbig and Gilley 2010), the Chinese government's legitimacy became increasingly tied to economic performance and social goods delivery after Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms, commencing in 1979 (A. Wang 2013). During this period, regulatory state logic emerged but was secondary compared to developmental state logic. The intense economic development brought about significant social problems, including uncontrolled urbanization, corruption, and environmental damage. Therefore, economic development could no longer be the sole source of legitimacy for the government (Gilley and Holbig 2009; Holbig and Gilley 2010). Since 2012, China has shifted political attention to resource conservation and environmental protection as fundamental national policies (Kostka and Zhang 2018). A key underlying factor contributing to these challenges is the frequent introduction of reforms by new leaders. Reforms typically aim to update or improve governance structures and processes. However, they can inadvertently cause competing institutional logics to coexist (Reay and Hinings 2009). As a result, regulatory state logic has been reinforced and has started to compete with the developmental system.

China shares the typical attributes of developing countries that promote competition between regulatory state logic and developmental state logic. First, it cannot simultaneously maintain productivity while consuming less energy and reducing emissions (Chen and Jia 2023). Second, although the cadre evaluation system has started considering environmental protection (J. Wang and Lei 2021), pollution control activities are rarely rewarded. According to Leng and Zuo (2022), the cadre evaluation system in China exemplifies how top-down control

mechanisms incorporate bounded flexibility through bargaining at the meso level. While the central government grapples with meeting the increasingly diverse demands of Chinese society, the fragmentation of the authoritarian system creates opportunities for local governments to distort central policies to serve the personal interests of local cadres.

Over time, China's central government has shifted toward more stringently enforcing environmental regulations, resulting in growing pressures on local bureaucrats to adapt. In the last few decades, recognizing the growing environmental concerns, China enacted environmental regulations, signaling a reinforcement of the regulatory state logic. The Five-Year Plans in recent years established stricter environmental and energy targets, and since 2011, cadre evaluation has included environmental indicators (Kostka and Zhang 2018). The Appendix provides a timeline of the major governmental policies introduced to bolster development and environmental regulations over the past 4 decades.

If solely influenced by regulatory state logic, enforcement officials in China would enforce laws strictly without considering local economic impacts. Conversely, under developmental state logic, they would prioritize economic growth, often disregarding the high environmental costs and central government's increasing emphasis on environmental protection. In practice, however, these officials navigate a mix of logics, and the developmental state logic continues to predominantly influence local bureaucracy, thereby hindering effective environmental regulation (Mol and Carter 2006). Given the increasing workload due to regulatory state logic and multiple conflicting pressures from the government and the public, environmental law enforcement officials are confronted with challenging and stressful regulatory situations and struggle to maintain a balance among multiple tasks. In response to ambiguity and conflicts, enforcement officials focus on short-term goals (Zhou et al. 2013) and "performative governance" (Ding 2020) involving "more superficial, reversible activities to demonstrate loyalty or assuage public concerns" (Van der Kamp 2021, 200). For instance, while participating in large-scale environmental protection activities organized by the central government to demonstrate their loyalty (A. Wang 2013), local officials are inclined to reduce only the most publicly visible pollutants, neglecting less noticeable contaminants (Liang and Langbein 2015).

### 3 | Data and Method

We employed a qualitative research design to investigate how competing institutional logics influence the meso-level and micro-level (Meyers et al. 2007). We collected descriptive data through interviews about environmental policy implementation tasks and the working conditions of SLBs in EPBs. Between July 2019 and August 2022, we conducted 20 face-to-face interviews with leaders of environmental law enforcement teams. Some interviews were with individuals, and some were with small groups. The duration of each interview was 60–120 min. Our research sites were two Chinese cities with distinct local contexts: a major city in western China and a smaller city in

southern China. The two cities differ in their primary government priorities and enforcement pressures. The western city faces significant economic development pressures, with local policies prioritizing growth and industrial expansion. In contrast, the southern city, serving as a water protection zone, is primarily tasked with environmental protection, and its local government emphasizes ecological preservation. These differing priorities create variations in enforcement pressures and regulatory tasks for SLBs in the two regions.

Our primary interviewees were captains or deputy captains of municipal, district-level, and county-level environmental law enforcement teams. These officials were selected because they not only serve as frontline enforcement personnel, directly interacting with the public and enterprises, but also because their leadership roles provide them with a broad understanding of organizational-level operations. The majority of our interviewees were men, particularly those in captain or deputy captain roles, as women leaders in these positions are rare. In some interviews, the leader also invited one or two members of the enforcement teams without leadership roles, among whom were several women. In terms of age, captains and deputy captains were normally aged between 31 and 50 years. Accordingly, around half of these leaders had 10–15 years of work experience, while the other half had 16–20 years of experience.

To ensure the representativeness of our sample, we interviewed participants from diverse types of districts within the two cities, reflecting different levels of industrial intensity. These included industry-intensive districts, high-tech districts, and districts with well-developed tertiary industries. We also incorporated extreme cases to capture a broad spectrum of enforcement contexts (Etikan et al. 2016). For instance, one district in our sample had the highest number of administrative penalties issued for environmental violations in its province, reflecting intense regulatory pressures. Conversely, another district was dominated by tertiary industries, with only 10 factories, presenting a considerably lighter regulatory burden. While the specific regulatory tasks and contexts varied across districts, all participants indicated that their work was influenced by competing institutional logics. To protect the anonymity of our interviewees, we do not disclose the names of the two cities where the interviews were conducted and the demographic characteristics of each interviewee.<sup>2</sup> Although the tasks and contexts of these two cities differ, our findings in the next section indicate that the bureaucrats were similarly shaped by competing institutional logics.

Our questions pertained to enforcement tasks, work difficulties, social pressures, departmental collaboration, and personal experiences. During the interviews, we refrained from dealing with sensitive topics to avoid offending the interviewees. For example, we did not directly ask them to identify the government departments with which they clashed in the process of enforcement. Instead, we provided opportunities for participants to share their feelings toward and stories of cooperation with other bureaus. We used archival data for the two research sites from the official websites of the provincial governments, the Municipal Bureau of Ecology and Environment websites, and other public sources to perform triangulation.

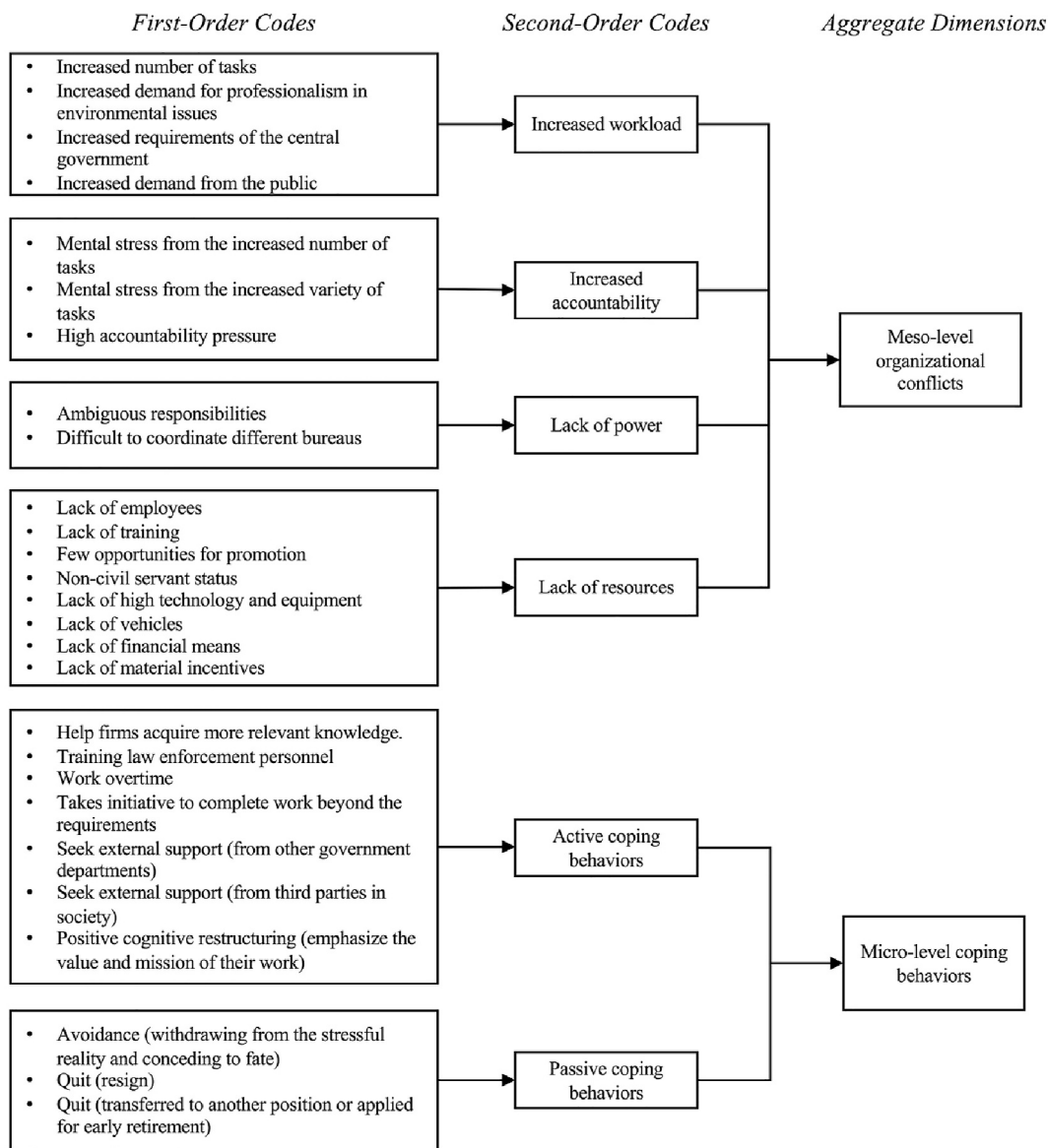
We used NVivo 12 to analyze the interview data, following the thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke 2006). Our aim was to analyze the interview data to identify the interviewees' experiences, perceptions, and behaviors. Therefore, thematic analysis was considered appropriate (Clarke and Braun 2017). First, after familiarizing ourselves with the interview data, we began by coding the transcripts and identifying key phrases and descriptions directly expressed by participants. These initial codes captured organizational conflicts and coping behaviors, such as increasing task complexity, accountability stress, and material resource shortages, forming the first-order codes shown in Figure 1. At the end of the first step, we had 286 coded paragraphs.

Next, we carefully read and compared the initial codes we created. We explored internal consistency, thematic relationships, and groupings. Then, we started to develop the themes. We identified the themes of accountability and workload, which are emphasized in recent studies discussing competing institutional logics in public sectors (Grossi et al. 2020; Thomann et al. 2016). For example, the challenges of an increased number of tasks, higher professionalism demands, and heightened public and central government requirements were grouped under the theme of “increased workload,” while stress caused by accountability pressures and task variety formed the theme of “increased accountability.” Competing institutional logics are often associated with ambiguity and conflict (Fowler 2021; Jensen et al. 2018). Matland (1995), in the ambiguity-conflict model, highlighted power and resources as two key factors. In line with Matland's approach, we considered power and resources are two key factors shaping meso-level organizational conflicts. Similarly, challenges related to ambiguous responsibilities and inter-bureau coordination were categorized as “lack of power,” while resource-related constraints were grouped under “lack of resources.” Together, these second-order codes were synthesized into the overarching dimension of “meso-level organizational conflicts.”

We coded participants' coping behaviors in response to competing institutional logics, adapting key items from the Strategic Approach to Coping Scale (Hobfoll et al. 1994). We grouped the associated behaviors into “active coping behaviors” and “passive coping behaviors.” Active coping behaviors included seeking external support, positive cognitive restructuring, and other assertive actions, such as working overtime and encouraging firms to acquire more knowledge related to environmental protection (Buchwald and Schwarzer 2003). In contrast, passive coping behaviors were characterized by avoidance and quit (Nielsen and Knardahl 2014). These two themes were combined into the overarching dimension of “coping behaviors.” This iterative process ensured that our data structure (Figure 1) accurately represents the interplay of meso-level organizational conflicts posed by competing institutional logics and the coping behaviors of enforcement officials.

## 4 | Findings

Our interview data captured organizational conflicts at the meso level and coping behaviors at the micro level. The manifestation



**FIGURE 1** | Data structure.

of macro-level competing institutional logics is primarily reflected in the central government's policies, which often include multiple goals at the same time (details can be found in the Appendix A). All of our interviewees mentioned that meso-level organizational conflicts result from the competition between the regulatory state logic and the developmental state logic. Our findings section highlights the interplay between these three levels.

In Figure 1, we provide a detailed data structure outlining the first-order codes, second-order codes, and aggregate dimensions from the interviews. It highlights how SLBs face challenges arising from increased workload, accountability pressures, and a lack of power and resources. These conflicts, rooted in the competition between regulatory state logic and developmental state logic, manifest as meso-level conflicts and lead to micro-level coping behaviors.

Table 2 summarizes the findings by presenting the prevalence of each key factor and coping behavior, showing their total

references, total cases, and the percentage of the sample size affected. As Table 2 shows, all the identified factors have significant impacts on the participants' work, and the adoption of coping behaviors by enforcement officials is also prevalent. These factors affect the majority of the sample, indicating that these challenges are widespread and representative of enforcement work. The findings reveal that participants struggle to meet conflicting demands from the government, enterprises, and the public, leading to significant ambiguity and conflict in their roles. For example, as discussed in Interview B, if frontline enforcement officials strictly enforce the law, local governments will object to the severe damage caused to businesses. Several participants echoed this sentiment. Members of Interview D explicitly expressed the view that the district government prefers when enforcement teams take a less harsh approach to enforcement, thereby reducing the impact on economic development. Our findings show that SLBs must grapple with perceived ambiguity and conflicts in their daily work. Under significant pressure and with limited cooperation, they exert tremendous effort in dealing with the increasing workload and

**TABLE 2** | Summary of factors, coping behaviors, and prevalence identified from interviews.

Factors identified from interviews	Total references	Total cases	Percentage of total sample size
Increased workload	27	12	60%
Increased accountability	48	16	80%
Lack of power	18	9	45%
Lack of resource	95	20	100%
Active coping behaviors	65	19	95%
Passive coping behaviors	33	14	70%

accountability despite inadequate resources and insufficient power.

#### 4.1 | Consequences of Competing Institutional Logics

Central governments, in consideration of the needs of multiple stakeholders, including the public and businesses, tend to establish multiple goals rather than a single target (Chen and Jia 2023). This complexity is evident in the field of environmental law enforcement, which is constrained by developmental state logic and regulatory state logic. Local EPBs are impacted by these competing institutional logics. The regulatory state logic increases their workload and responsibilities, while the developmental state logic does not provide them with sufficient power and resources from local governments.

##### 4.1.1 | Workload

First, a common perspective among interviewees was the significant increase in their workloads. This surge in workloads is a consequence of heightened environmental concerns from the central government and the public. China has experienced a shift toward “responsive authoritarianism,” meaning that “the state allows for a limited degree of public participation and has been increasingly responsive to appeals from nonstate actors” (Marquis and Bird 2018, 948). Since 2009, the public has been allowed to report pollution incidents and participate in environmental supervision. Our interviewees complained about how this change caused an increasing number of tasks.

We are facing more and more work. We used to have 500 or 400 people managing 20,000 tasks, and now we have to deal with 100,000 tasks with the same number of people, and that pressure keeps increasing every year (Interview A).

The above quotation indicates the increasing influence of regulatory state logic. It emphasizes strict enforcement of environmental laws in response to heightened environmental concerns from the central government and the public. In 2019, more than 530,000 complaints were received through the Ministry's WeChat account or the hotline (Ministry of Ecology and Environment of PRC 2020). Interviewees in Interviews C, D, and L in our study reported that their enforcement teams received more than 1000 complaints each year. Meanwhile,

frontline law enforcement officials face challenges in maintaining high professional standards when confronted with a heavy workload. An interviewee in Interview A mentioned their lack of expertise in technology and law enforcement.

##### 4.1.2 | Accountability

Although the local bureaucratic system primarily adheres to developmental state logic, it must also conform to regulatory state logic to gain legitimacy and maintain social stability. In recent years, the central government has imposed higher requirements and greater accountability pressures; there are ambitious goals for building a carbon-neutral future (Ministry of Ecology and Environment of PRC 2021). Enforcement officials often find that their work is influenced by developmental and regulatory state logic. Enforcement officials are required to consider developmental factors such as industrial development, tax revenue, and government–enterprise relations. However, interviewees reported that they must respond to all reports and complaints received from citizens, even those that are overly demanding or result from conflicts of personal interest. The interviewees' frustration is evident in comments such as “it is a significant waste of our work time and administrative resources,” as expressed in Interview E. Competing goals and unclear requirements rooted in two institutional logics create substantial accountability pressures for enforcement officials. These findings align with the Hupe and Hill (2007) argument that SLBs are subject to multiple accountabilities and that regulatory and developmental state logics result in tensions.

In 2015, to relieve the pressure of workload and accountability, the General Office of the State Council of China issued a policy of random inspection and public release (*Shuang Sui Ji, Yi Gong Kai*). This policy means that the inspection objects and inspectors are randomly selected by machines, and that the criteria, process, and results of the inspections should be publicized in a timely manner. This policy has been applied not only to environmental protection enforcement but also to areas such as corporate audits and fire safety inspections. According to the random inspection policy, the government does not hold the local enforcement team accountable for the polluting behavior of enterprises not selected for inspection (Kong et al. 2023). Ideally, the random inspection policy could help reduce the pressure for the accountability of SLBs to a great extent. However, given the differences in enforcement resources and the importance provincial governments place on this policy, its effectiveness in dealing with accountability pressures varies. Several interviewees indicated that random inspection has

largely reduced the pressure to accountability pressure. However, some interviewees felt that this promise of no longer being responsible after fulfilling one's duties was impossible to achieve.

It is reasonable to say that we do not need to be held accountable for additional enterprises once we have completed the tasks from random inspection, but the government and the Commission for Discipline Inspection do not agree with this. All colleagues have been warned, and there have been disciplinary actions for entities that were not randomly inspected but violated the law (Interview P).

The responses from the interviewees reflect the extent of accountability pressure caused by regulatory state logic. Across all interviews, the growing accountability pressure was mentioned 48 times. Although the central government has attempted to alleviate enforcement officers' pressure through some innovative measures, the strong regulatory state logic creates a system in which someone must bear the blame, and frontline enforcement officers are often the first to be held accountable. One of our interviewees, describing the mental stress stemming from the workload and accountability, stated, "I feel like a bomb is under my ass right now," underscoring the pressure faced, as mentioned in Interview E.

#### 4.1.3 | Resources

Table 2 shows that the resource issue is the most prevalent, as it is mentioned in 100% of the sample. As detailed in Interview K, 30 enforcement officials in their team supervised 2424 pollution sources and over 3000 enterprises in that region. Many interviewees conveyed that they lacked sufficient staff to handle their extensive responsibilities: "Now we are working all day without rest. We are already overloaded. The daily workload of the staff is more than double what it should be" (Interview J).

In terms of human resources, EPBs are facing a shortage of personnel. Existing employees are grappling with resource scarcity, which includes a lack of training opportunities, limited chances for promotion, and a deficiency in bureaucratic status. Employees often complain that they are not adequately recognized, particularly due to the difficulty in obtaining promotions:

In our unit, the last promotion to deputy captain was in 2005. There have been no promotions for over 14 years. In fact, as the captain and deputy captain positions are already filled, there is no promotion opportunities for the subordinates. Many of the young people worked on the team all their lives, but they can only be a team member (without job tenure) (Interview B).

Most frontline enforcement officers have non-civil servant status but are managed under the civil servant system. This non-civil servant status reduces the promotion prospects for local EPB staff. The transition from a horizontal (*kuai*)—to a vertical

(*tiao*)—based management system in the environmental bureaucracy further hinders career advancement, as employees are confined to environmental units (Ma 2017). As one interviewee emphasized, "with so many people and such a large team, it is very difficult to get a promotion, even half a step" (Interview D).

This predicament extends to material resources. Our interviewees contend that, following administrative reform in the bureaucratic system, enforcement officials lack access to vehicles, significantly impeding their ability to conduct on-site inspections:

Our biggest difficulty is that we do not have a car. When the official car system reform was implemented in 2016 and 2017, our environmental enforcement team was not designated as a law enforcement agency of the State Council. Consequently, we auctioned all seven of our cars at that time or transferred them to the District Public Security Bureau, which has law enforcement authority (Interview L).

Participants also highlighted the need for high-tech equipment, including big data, meteorological technology, and geographic technology: "I believe that with access to high-tech equipment and big data, we can enhance our regulatory work to a higher level," mentioned an interviewee in Interview F. The lack of material and human resources is caused by the influence of developmental state logic. If regulatory state logic were the only element at play, the state would concentrate human and material resources on strict enforcement. However, local governments are simultaneously influenced by the priority of economic development, leading them to allocate more resources elsewhere while failing to provide sufficient bureaucratic support to environmental departments.

The central government frequently provides incongruous political incentives for environmental protection and economic development. National policymakers neglect the potential harm inflicted by stringent environmental policies on the ground (Yang and Zhao 2023). Neither individual nor institutional interests encourage local governments to fully implement environmental policies (Ran 2013). The control of resources by external actors opposing the policy, as outlined by Matland (1995), impedes local EPBs from obtaining minimal financial support and material incentives (Zhan et al. 2014). Policies, especially those related to permits, tend to be symbolic due to the absence of clear financial mechanisms and related budgetary requirements (Li et al. 2019). Our interviewees expressed discontent about their material incentives and rewards. One participant in Interview J complained about the overtime pay, which the Public Security Bureau has, but EPBs and their units do not have.

#### 4.1.4 | Power

Recent literature underscores the divergence in attitudes toward economic development between national and local governments. EPBs have traditionally been considered weak departments. The primary focus of local governments is on protecting businesses, employment, and tax revenues. Therefore, EPBs are typically at a

low rank within the local political hierarchy (Zhan et al. 2014). As one interviewee said, “Environmental workers are a vulnerable group. While the central government has set requirements, and President Xi has emphasized the importance of environmental protection, at the local level, people tend to disregard these orders from the central government” (Interview J). These comments highlight the lack of power of EPBs, as evidenced by their challenges in cooperating with other departments and their ambiguous responsibilities. In their daily work, EPBs must coordinate with various departments, including the Public Security Bureau, the courts, the Urban Management Bureau, the Traffic Management Bureau, and others. However, departments with more power may lack incentives to provide the necessary support for local EPBs. For example, cooperation with the Public Security Bureau in collecting evidence during law enforcement is often difficult because the Public Security Bureau perceives the Environmental Protection Department as being in an inferior power position.

Among higher-level government departments and the general public, there is a blurring of responsibilities between bureaus. A respondent in Interview G provided an example: “When a restaurant with environmental hazards is allowed to operate, it should fall under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Industry and Commerce, rather than the EPBs. Nonetheless, the public frequently complains about EPBs in such situations.”

## 4.2 | Conflicts in Policy Implementation

The challenges faced by enforcement officials in their daily work become even more pronounced as conflicts intensify. The combination of an increased number of tasks and limited resources forces staff to operate on a minimal budget. Across all cases, informants reported a significant increase in their workload, particularly after the 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party at the end of 2012. Despite this substantial increase in workload, the number of positions remained unchanged. For example, an interviewee from Interview D mentioned:

Ten years ago, we received about 700 complaints from the public, but last year, this number had risen to 1,350. The workload doubled, but the number of staff remained the same (Interview D).

In Interview L, a participant expressed similar concerns:

When the government determined the number of staff positions in our team, we received only 200 complaints a year from the public. Now, there are more than 1,000 complaints a year. The number of complaints has multiplied, but the number of people assigned to us cannot match the workload (Interview L).

Second, the increased workload and accountability place enforcement officials under significant pressure, with little return for their efforts. Enforcement officials are anxious about being blamed for not giving enough attention to environmental protection, especially considering the heightened public

awareness of this issue. Weaver’s (1986) theory of blame avoidance suggests that subjects with low power are more likely to be targeted for blame. Drawing from news and archival data, mayors are the least likely to face blame, while the weak position of EPBs in the local power structure often makes them the most likely scapegoats for environmental issues (Ran 2017). Two interviewees offered their perspectives:

No matter where the inspection team of ecological and environmental protection goes, the EPBs will be blamed. In any scenario, we are the designated targets for blame (Interview C).

Whether you work for 24 hours per day or not, in the end, you are the target to be blamed. This is inevitable (Interview J).

In general, the increased workload and accountability have led to strong dissatisfaction among enforcement officials, who find it challenging to bear such unreasonable demands. As a participant in Interview J shared, “Now, none of us are eager to be part of the law enforcement team, which is more at risk and has more responsibilities; yet, the incentives remain the same as for other positions.”

Lack of power hampers EPBs from enforcing environmental regulations alongside other government units that are of equal, or even higher, ranking (Zhan et al. 2014). The unclear distribution of responsibilities among bureaus results in poor coordination. An interviewee in Interview G stated the following:

Many departments are uncertain about their environmental responsibilities. They believe that all work related to environmental protection must be handled by EPBs. For example, the Urban Management and Law Enforcement Bureau is responsible for the emission of smoke from small restaurant in the city but will request that the EPB collects evidence and produces the test report. According to the regulations, the Urban Management and Law Enforcement Bureau is required to collect pollution evidence on its own (Interview G).

As described by the interviewees, certain matters fall under the jurisdiction of relevant departments, but when it comes to environmental issues, other departments tend to delegate work to the EPBs. Similar to the challenges faced by the Bureau of Urban Management in inter-agency collaboration, SLBs often experience a heightened workload due to the evasion of responsibilities by other departments (Zang 2017). This dynamic intensifies accountability pressures and limits the effectiveness of policy implementation.

## 4.3 | Coping Behaviors in Policy Implementation

As it stands, there is a risk of EPBs falling into what Skelcher and Smith (2015) refer to as a “blocked” hybrid organizational form, which arises when “[t]he tensions between these original

and externally imposed institutional logics sometimes provoke serious disquiet among organizational members, leading to a stalemate” (Skelcher and Smith 2015, 443). Our interviewees repeatedly mentioned the conflicts they experienced because of the following four factors: workload, accountability, power, and resources. In Interview A and Interview C, for example, some interviewees stated that the lack of clarity in the duty scope of EPB enforcement officers made it ambiguous for them. Meanwhile, the perceived conflicts of EPBs come from several sources. First, they realize that in their daily law enforcement work, environmental enforcement and economic development have conflicting outlooks (see, for example, Interviews B, D, and H). Our interviewee in Interview B mentioned that “Environmental protection has no value in itself. Environmental protection and making money are contradictory.” Second, they simultaneously perceived that they were in conflict with the regulated companies as well as the public, and this added to their stress. They are regarded as people who threaten the livelihood of businessmen (Interview B) or as those who do not respond seriously to public complaints (Interview H).

SLBs employ coping strategies to address organizational-level conflicts arising from competing institutional logics. We identified active and passive coping strategies from the interview data. Regarding active coping behaviors, SLBs use their personal resources in response to the perceived ambiguity and conflicts arising from competing institutional logics. They use their knowledge of laws and regulations to help regulatees better understand requirements and penalties. Additionally, they make extra efforts to improve the effectiveness of law enforcement by attending training courses, working overtime, and making extra efforts in their own practice. At the cognitive level, they also engage in positive cognitive restructuring to comfort their dissatisfaction with the conditions of law enforcement. L. Zhang et al. (2021) reported that SLBs in China can act as policy entrepreneurs and actively seek external support, including collaboration with other government departments and third parties (e.g., experts, testing agencies, and environmental non-governmental organizations) to address gaps in professional competence. To facilitate collaboration with more powerful bureaus, such as the Public Security Bureau and the Bureau of Industry and Commerce, the environmental protection department seeks higher-level authorities to lead their programs, such as mayors and district governors. These measures align with entrepreneurial approaches that enhance professionalism and enforcement efficiency through coalition building and institutional engagement (L. Zhang et al. 2021).

Regarding passive coping behaviors, they may withdraw from the stressful reality and concede to fate. The interviewees from Interviews C, M, and S mentioned that they are “worn out trying to cope.” There are SLBs who tend to flee reality and do not make an effort. Some SLBs even adopted the coping behavior of quitting by resigning from the EPBs or transferring to another position. In Interview P, an interviewee complained that “all young civil servants in my department have switched jobs. They switched to other bureaus or other departments in our bureaus. I’m the only young civil servant left. All my subordinates are new recruits this year” (Interview P). When the conflicts brought about by competing institutional logics cannot

be tolerated, law enforcement becomes an exhausting task that results in burnout among SLBs.

In summary, macro-level competing institutional logics have given rise to meso-level organizational conflicts, prompting SLBs to employ micro-level coping behaviors. Figure 2 illustrates our framework.

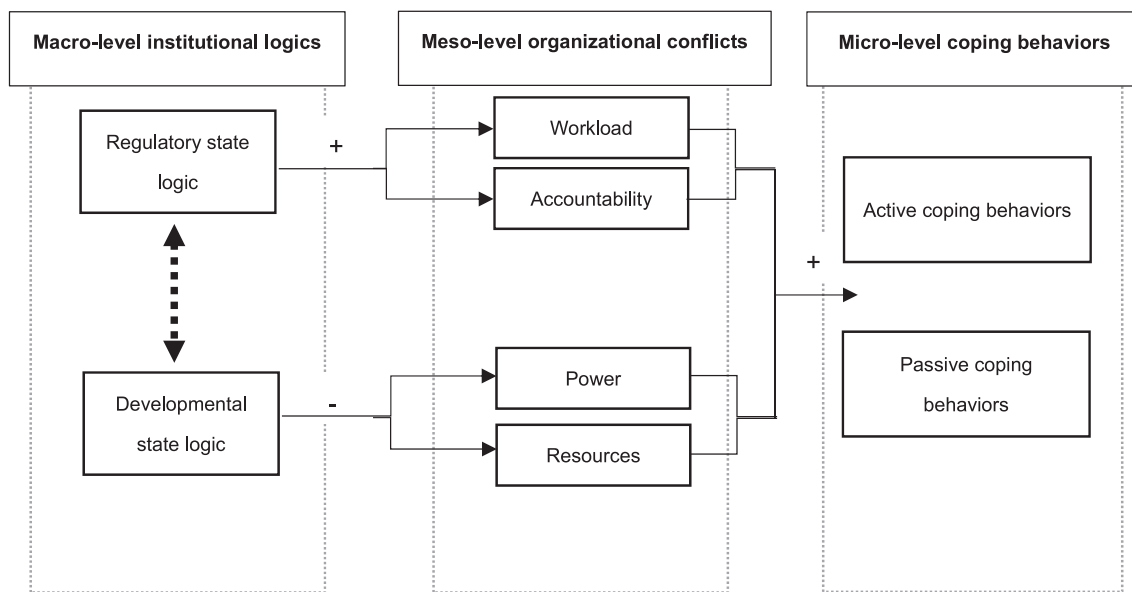
## 5 | Discussion and Conclusion

When implementing public policies, SLBs face significant challenges in workload, accountability, power, and resources. However, attributing implementation difficulties solely to job-related factors is inadequate and insufficient. The predicament of SLBs in environmental policy implementation can be traced to competing institutional logics at the macro level. While higher-level governments and the public demand more in terms of environmental issues, SLBs report that their power and resources have not increased proportionately. This disparity makes it difficult for SLBs to complete their required tasks while remaining accountable.

Our study identifies that competing institutional logics have given rise to organizational-level conflicts, which further create conflicts and tensions at the individual level. When local government leaders encounter two potentially conflicting directives, they tend to choose a strategy that aligns with their political interests. Local governments consider the central government’s assessment criteria, the resource-intensive nature of environmental protection, and strategies to deflect accountability. In response, the central government has cautioned local governments to balance regulatory and developmental state logics through nationwide campaigns, such as the Inspection of Ecological and Environmental Protection, and a platform for citizens to submit complaints to the central government. When conventional enforcement methods fail to enforce environmental protection policies, the Chinese government strategically allocates resources and redistributes power through campaign-style enforcement (N. N. Liu et al. 2015). As mentioned, local EPBs also cope by implementing a random inspection policy that allocates a reasonable workload.

Our findings have significant implications for research on policy implementation. We underscore the importance of policy-makers and bureaucrats recognizing the presence of conflicting goals and mandates that exert enormous pressure on SLBs, leading to challenges that cannot be resolved by the SLBs themselves (R. E. Meyer et al. 2014). We contend that the shortage of essential factors for successful implementation, such as power and resources within local EPBs, can be partly attributed to competing institutional logics.

Our findings contribute to the literature on institutional logics. Joining recent efforts to examine the micro-level dynamics of institutional logics (McPherson and Sauder 2013; Zilber 2024), our study introduces a multi-level framework linking macro-level institutional logics to meso-level organizational conflicts and micro-level coping behaviors, offering a comprehensive understanding of how competing logics influence public policy



**FIGURE 2** | The impact of competing institutional logics on policy implementation.

implementation. For example, mandating the random inspections policy is an attempt to align with regulatory state logic while maintaining control over developmental costs. Consistent with Pache and Santos (2013), we found that EPBs intend to *assimilate* developmental state logic with regulatory state logic by selectively combining elements from both logics. At the individual level, our findings show that enforcement officials engage in active and passive coping behaviors, such as working longer hours or quitting as a response to competing institutional logics.

The current body of research on the regulatory state is primarily informed by experiences in a democratic context, thereby falling short of capturing the complexities of regulations in authoritarian regimes. By studying the competition between regulatory state logic and developmental state logic, our research contributes to the growing body of work on institutional logics in developing and/or authoritarian regimes (Chen and Jia 2023), thereby answering the call of Lounsbury and Wang (2023). Our study has broad implications for the understanding of SLBs in other policy domains and other countries. Competing logics influence SLBs when policies are ambiguous and inconsistent, a situation that can be observed in democratic and authoritarian countries. For example, political elections and regulatory reforms can bring significant disruptions and conflicting priorities to the policy environment (Bolton et al. 2020). As a result, limited power and resources, which are frequently mentioned in our findings, will exacerbate bureaucrats' struggles to reconcile competing institutional logics in western countries. Our study has practical implications for other transitioning countries experiencing high pressures related to state development and state regulation, especially when their industrial structure and technology are insufficient for supporting both goals simultaneously. The limited resources of transitioning countries make it particularly difficult for SLBs to balance regulatory and developmental goals.

Our research has some limitations. The data collected from the interviews may be subjective, and the interviews were conducted in two Chinese cities, which limits the external validity of the findings. Our research suggests several potential directions for future research. First, competition between institutional logics is a dynamic process, making a case for longitudinal studies. The Chinese central government's stance on environmental protection has evolved over the past 2 decades. Institutional logics do not merely shape actors' behaviors in a top-down manner; conversely, actors' behaviors shape institutional logics over time, leading to meso- and macro-level changes (Powell and Colyvas 2008; Thornton et al. 2012). Second, while our discussion concentrates on environmental policy implementation, future studies could explore competing institutional logics in other policy domains, such as social welfare (Yan et al. 2021) and academic research (Dunn and Jones 2010), focusing on the interplay between macro-level institutional forces, meso-level conflicts, and micro-level coping behaviors. Third, in addition to the effect of competing institutional logics on enforcement conflicts, these logics also greatly influence SLBs' identity shifts (R. E. Meyer et al. 2014; Skelcher and Smith 2015). Future research could investigate the interplay between identity shifts and coping strategies in contexts in which individuals confront competing institutional logics. Moreover, a potential topic for future research could be how specific environmental factors influence the coping strategies of SLBs when facing competing institutional logics. Our findings demonstrate a pathway through which macro-institutional logics influence meso-conflicts and micro-level coping behaviors, which may also be moderated by various environmental features, such as regulatory complexity, policy uncertainty, and political risk. Finally, considering the call for reindustrialization and the deregulation movement to weaken independent regulatory agencies in the United States and other developed countries, a cross-country comparative analysis could reveal the varying intensity and stability of competing institutional logics.

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## Ethics Statement

This research has obtained ethics approval from The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (No.: HSEARS20190827001).

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## Data Availability Statement

The data underlying this article cannot be shared publicly due to the privacy of individuals that participated in the study.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> In China, when local governmental officials fail to accomplish policy tasks with “veto power”, their performance would be assessed as failure, and thus local officials normally treat policy tasks with “veto power” as top priorities (Chan and Gao 2008).

<sup>2</sup> The interviews in the city in western China were conducted in the summer of 2019, prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, while the interviews in the smaller city in southern China were conducted in the summer of 2022, during the pandemic. The smaller city is relatively isolated, with limited connections to other cities, and experienced minimal disruption from the pandemic. As a result, the pandemic did not significantly affect the behavior of the street-level bureaucrats in our sample.

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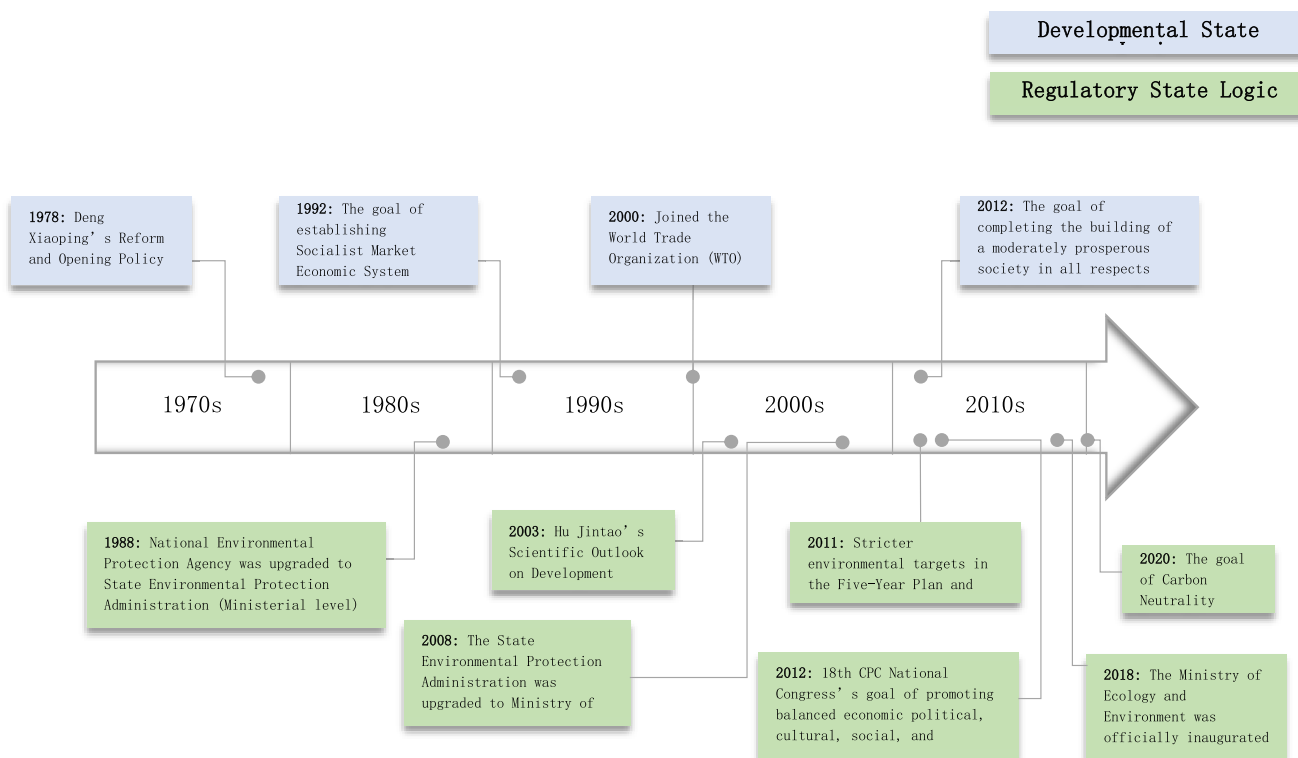
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**Appendix A: Timeline of Major Governmental Policies Illustrating Competing Institutional Logics**



We indicated major Chinese governmental policies that correspond to either the developmental state logic (blue boxes) or regulatory state logic (green boxes). For clarity, we started this timeline from Deng Xiaoping's reform in 1978.