

# Introducing Shiran Victoria Shen

Assistant Professor of Political Science, Washington University in St Louis

Victoria's research examines how institutions and incentives shape climate and environmental action in both developing countries—especially China—and the United States. More broadly, her work engages core questions in public policy and governance. Methodologically, she integrates theoretical frameworks and empirical strategies from political science, public policy, and environmental science to produce empirically grounded, policy-relevant research.



**You've explored how incentives and institutions influence sustainability actions in developing countries. Could you share a particularly compelling example that illustrates the complex interplay between political will and sustainability policy?**

One especially illustrative example is Beijing's widely publicized effort to deliver "Olympic Blue" skies in the summer of 2008. In preparation for the Olympic Games, the Beijing municipal government, in coordination with provincial leaders—including those in distant regions whose emissions could be transported atmospherically into the capital—enacted sweeping environmental restrictions to dramatically improve air quality. These included temporary factory closures, strict vehicle bans, and curbs on construction activities. The initiative demonstrated extraordinary political will—leaders were highly motivated to improve air quality, and they had both the authority and the capacity to implement disruptive changes on a large scale.

However, this moment—while striking—also revealed the limits of political will alone. Although short-term air quality improved, many of the measures were exceptional, short-lived, and did not target the underlying sources of long-term pollution. As I detail in my book, *The Political Regulation Wave*, the policy response did not fully account for the physicochemical properties and atmospheric dynamics of specific pollutants.

This example illustrates a broader lesson: political will is a necessary, but insufficient, condition for lasting sustainability policy. Meaningful progress requires not only commitment, but also science-informed policy tools and durable institutions that incentivize consistent enforcement. As I argue in my work on "regularized campaigns," the challenge is not simply launching enforcement efforts, but building institutions that keep local actors engaged and accountable over time—even without constant oversight.

**Your book, *The Political Regulation Wave: A Case of How Local Incentives Systematically Shape Air Quality in China*, has received multiple prestigious awards. What key insight about local incentives and environmental policy do you believe makes this work so appreciated?**

The key insight that I think has resonated the most with both scholars and policymakers is that local political incentives—especially those linked to career advancement—systematically shape how environmental policies are enforced on the ground. Regulatory effectiveness, I argue, cannot be separated from the incentive structures facing local officials.

One aspect of the book that readers have found especially valuable is its combination of rigorous empirical

analysis—grounded in original data and quantitative methods—and broader theoretical reach. The final chapter extends this analysis to democratic Mexico, showing how electoral incentives there similarly led to regulatory forbearance during key political junctures. In both settings, the core insight is the same: policy outcomes are shaped not only by intent or capacity, but by how incentives interact with the timing, visibility, and complexity of implementation.

This insight has shaped subsequent discussions on how to design institutional mechanisms that resolve the principal-agent problem and sustain compliance over time. By embedding periodic, structured enforcement waves into governance systems, regularized campaigns sustain central priorities, realign local incentives, and reduce compliance disparities even between enforcement waves.

The broader takeaway is that lasting sustainability outcomes depend on institutional designs that align incentives with long-term objectives. Regularized campaigns offer one model for doing so, particularly in settings where formal enforcement capacity is uneven or politically volatile.

## "Trust one's intellectual instincts, even when they run against the grain."

**From Swarthmore to Stanford, and leading the China Energy Program, what has been the most transformative moment in your academic journey?**

Each stage of my academic journey has been transformative in distinct ways. I arrived at Swarthmore from Beijing, where I had been on a STEM track in high school—and where the political science curriculum focused on Marxism and Leninism, following the prevailing academic and institutional norms. Swarthmore's curriculum required students to study broadly across disciplines. To fulfill the social science requirement, I enrolled in a political science course—and was pleasantly surprised to find the subject highly engaging.

Perhaps most transformative was Swarthmore's culture of intellectual independence. From the beginning, I was encouraged to find my own voice and methodological approach—something that would continue to shape my path at Stanford and beyond.

Stanford was, in many ways, an academic paradise. The political science department offered rigorous training in cutting-edge methods, and I also pursued a master's in civil and environmental engineering. A surprising number of studies in environmental politics overlook the scientific properties of the issues they examine. For instance, not all pollutants are alike: their sources, formation processes, and political tractability differ. Without that technical grounding, researchers risk drawing misleading conclusions. One of my goals has been to advance a more integrated approach—bringing scientific accuracy into political analysis.

After completing my Ph.D., I accepted a leadership role in the China Energy Program—one that brought me closer to policy practice. We live in a suboptimal world, where brilliant ideas may not gain traction until a crisis hits; where cost-effective solutions face political constraints; and where policy breakthroughs can be interrupted or even reversed by shifts in political climate. Even within academia, structural incentives—such as intense within-subfield competition or a preference for incremental advances over more transformative thinking—can limit our ability to engage deeply with urgent and complex problems like sustainability.

If there is a single enduring lesson from this journey, it was instilled at Swarthmore: to trust one's intellectual instincts, even when they run against the grain. In a world of noise and short-termism, maintaining that internal clarity has been both grounding and liberating.

*Make sure to subscribe to the [GLD newsletter](#) to keep receiving notes about the 2025 Fellows, and other news from GLD.*

