Legal Challenges in the Transition of the Central Ecological and Environmental Protection Inspection System to Routine Oversight and Measures for Its Improvement

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Abstract: The Central Ecological and Environmental Protection Inspection is a major institutional innovation in China's ecological civilization construction; however, in practice, it still faces the dilemma of "campaign-style governance," and its legal causes and paths to improvement require further exploration. This paper employs text analysis and follows a "problem-dilemma-causes-pathways" framework to conduct the research. The study finds that the obstacles to transitioning to a routine system manifest in the absence of legal responsibilities, insufficient stability of the regulatory order, and a dualistic normative system; the underlying legal causes lie in divergent orientations toward legal interests, the absence of procedural norms, a lack of long-term mechanisms, a breakdown in the chain of power transmission, and the hollowing out of referral mechanisms. Based on these findings, this study proposes improvement pathways, including establishing a rule-of-law framework for balancing legal interests, filling gaps in procedural norms, promoting the statutory operation of oversight powers, improving long-term mechanisms for collaborative governance, and deepening the Institutionalization of Internal Regulations. By systematically analyzing the obstacles to this transition from a legal-theoretical perspective, this study offers new theoretical insights and practical approaches for transforming the oversight system from a campaign-style approach to routine supervision, providing valuable insights for the development of an ecological and environmental governance model with Chinese characteristics.

Keywords: Central Ecological and Environmental Protection Inspection System; Campaign-Style Governance; Routine Oversight

1. Introduction

The Central Ecological and Environmental Protection Inspection System represents a major institutional innovation in China's efforts to build an ecological civilization. Its transition from "campaign-style" inspections to "routine" oversight is key to ensuring the system's long-term effectiveness and preventing governance efforts from becoming merely a "flash in the pan." However, in practice, there are still instances of relapse after rectification and lax oversight, highlighting the deep-seated challenges facing this transition.

Academic circles generally acknowledge the necessity of this transition and have offered insights from various perspectives: some emphasize the need for the system to be internalized and "deeply integrated" into the governance system; others advocate for continuously strengthening central authority to exert pressure on local governments; and still others focus on macro-level planning or micro-level institutional design. The research further points out that while inspections have gained formal legitimacy through the enactment of internal regulations, there remains a tension in the exercise of their powers between their administrative and supervisory attributes. The lack of smooth coordination between internal regulations and state laws may result in institutional gaps when converting rectification requirements into legal liabilities.

However, existing research still has shortcomings: first, the legal analysis of the specific legal dilemmas underlying the "difficulty of transition"-such as the lack of legal procedures for coordinating responsibilities under the principle of "joint responsibility of the leadership and the government" and the specific obstacles to the "dual-track" operation of regulations-remains somewhat general; second, it remains to be elaborated how the proposed

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paths toward "normalization" and "rule of law" can be translated into specific rules and procedures that are both operational and capable of rationalizing existing legal relationships. Therefore, this paper aims to conduct an in-depth analysis of the specific legal challenges facing the transition of the Central Ecological and Environmental Protection Inspection System toward routine supervision, and to construct a systematic, rule-of-law-based improvement pathway tailored to these challenges, with the hope of contributing theoretical insights to ensure the steady and sustainable development of this system.

2. Literature Review

Domestic scholars have conducted fruitful research on the central ecological and environmental protection inspection system from multiple perspectives; in particular, discussions on pathways for its improvement and transition to a routine system form an important theoretical foundation for this study.

The main viewpoints of scholars can be summarized as follows: Li Yao points out that the system's design incorporates dual characteristics of both "routine" and "campaign-style" governance mechanisms; its long-term development should involve a shift from relying on "empowerment" by external political authority to deep "integration" into the existing environmental governance system. Through a systematic analysis of the issues identified in the first round of inspections, Luo Sanbao, Du Bin, and Sun Pengcheng argue that the root causes lie in intense political pressure, the fact that environmental governance has entered a "tackling the toughest challenges" phase characterized by rising marginal costs, and disparities in implementation intensity resulting from regional differences. They recommend formulating a five-year inspection plan to provide top-level design and a long-term roadmap. Scholars such as Wang Guangliang have proposed multi-faceted improvement strategies, the core of which includes refining institutional safeguards tailored to local conditions, continuously leveraging central authority, and strictly holding those responsible for misconduct accountable. Scholar Ji Pengfei, focusing on the legal challenges of the first round of environmental inspections (such as the weak legal basis for the central environmental inspection system) and the legal innovations of the second round of central ecological and environmental inspections (such as the establishment of the first internal regulation in the field of ecological and environmental protection), proposed a series of legal perspectives regarding internal regulations for the central ecological and environmental inspection system.

Although the above viewpoints have different emphases, there is a clear consensus: there is widespread recognition that the effectiveness of campaign-style governance is unsustainable, and that promoting the transformation of inspections toward normalization and institutionalization is the inevitable direction. However, on the key question of "how to achieve normalization," scholars' views diverge, and this is precisely the starting point for the in-depth analysis required by this research project.

We can organize and compare these viewpoints according to different analytical criteria. From the perspective of "sources of power and modes of operation," they can be divided into two categories: one advocates internalizing inspections as a routine governance tool grounded in political authority (e.g., Li Yao), emphasizing deep integration with the governance system; the other focuses on continuously strengthening and utilizing the central authority of inspections to supervise and correct local environmental protection failures (e.g., Wang Guangliang et al.). The former focuses on institutional reshaping, while the latter emphasizes the sustained use of oversight as a pressure tool. Ji Pengfei's research further reveals the legal realities underlying this tension. He points out that the first round of inspections relied primarily on normative documents such as the "Implementation Plan" and ad hoc authorizations from the central government, resulting in a weak legal basis. This created a tension between the administrative nature of the "deliberative and coordinating body" and the supervisory requirements of "joint responsibility of the leadership and government." This explains, from a legal perspective, why "strengthening authority" and "normative integration" have become key points of contention. From the perspective of "normative and institutional construction," two categories can also be identified: One category emphasizes macro-level planning and guidance, such as formulating multi-year inspection work plans (as proposed by Luo Sanbao and others); the other focuses on

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micro-level, concrete institutional construction and refinement, such as improving supporting inspection systems at all levels across the country (as proposed by Wang Guangliang and others). The former provides the framework, while the latter fills in the details. Building on this foundation, Ji Pengfei's analysis offers deeper insights from the perspective of "normative form and legal effect." He argues that the 2019 "Regulations on Central Ecological and Environmental Protection Inspection Work," issued in the form of internal regulations, addressed the earlier issue of insufficient legal authority and marked a crucial step toward "formal legitimacy." However, he also points out that true "rule of law" cannot stop there; rather, it should focus on improving the internal regulatory system, coordinating internal regulations with national laws, and ensuring the organic integration of internal regulations with supporting legal systems.

Meanwhile, Jiang Yating, Du Yanqiang (2023), using the governance of Lake Daihai in Inner Mongolia under the Central Ecological and Environmental Protection Inspection as a case study, employed a theory-constructive process-tracking method to identify a causal mechanism linking the inspection to the effectiveness of local ecological and environmental governance. This mechanism consists of continuous interaction among three components: "contextual construction-behavioral adaptation-effectiveness generation." They further pointed out that the key to achieving institutional effectiveness lies in realizing a virtuous cycle of "pressure-capacity-motivation"; Although this study focuses on the process mechanisms of public administration rather than directly discussing the transition to normalization, it likewise reveals that inspections possess the dual attributes of both campaign-style high-level promotion and routine bureaucratic embedding. Its behavioral adaptation logic of "embedding campaigns into bureaucracy" and " special initiatives embedded in routine operations" provides an important empirical reference for understanding how inspections transition from external empowerment to deep integration with the existing governance system. It also indirectly corroborates Li Yao's argument for a transition "from empowerment to integration" as well as the consensus in existing literature regarding the tension between campaign-style and routine approaches and the necessity of normalization.

A comprehensive analysis of existing literature reveals that prior research has profoundly elucidated the dual "campaign-routine" nature of the inspection system, reached a consensus on the necessity of its transition to a routine mechanism, and offered valuable recommendations regarding the exercise of authority, policy formulation, and institutional development. However, there remains room for further exploration in existing research: First, the legal depth of the analysis of the "dilemmas" needs to be strengthened: Regarding the specific legal dilemmas underlying the "difficulty of transformation" (such as the legal procedures for coordinating leadership and government responsibilities), the legal analysis in existing literature remains somewhat general. Second, the coherence of the proposed pathways requires further refinement: How to translate the macro-level concept of "integration and embedding" into concrete, operational legal rules and procedural designs that can rationalize relationships with existing systems-such as environmental regulation, cadre evaluation, and accountability-is a key breakthrough needed in future research.

Therefore, building upon existing research findings, this project will strive to systematically construct a "goals-challenges-solutions" analytical framework, focusing primarily on identifying legal challenges and designing solutions at the legal level, with the aim of contributing theoretical insights to ensure the steady and sustainable development of the Central Ecological and Environmental Protection Inspection System.

3. The Challenge of Transitioning from "Campaign-Style" Inspections to "Routine" Oversight

As a major institutional innovation in China's ecological civilization efforts, the Central Ecological and Environmental Protection Inspection System achieved significant results in its early stages through its "campaign-style" governance model; however, this approach carries the risk of unsustainable effectiveness. Transitioning to "routine" oversight is key to ensuring its long-term effectiveness and avoiding the phenomenon of "short-lived campaigns." Measures such as "follow-up inspections" have strengthened the transmission of pressure, resolving a large number of

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prominent environmental issues in the short term. At the same time, however, a resurgence of "campaign-style" enforcement characteristics-such as a "rebound" in rectification efforts and lax follow-up oversight-has emerged in practice. This indicates that relying solely on political mobilization and high-pressure tactics makes it difficult to establish a stable and predictable order for environmental governance. Therefore, this study aims to propose a legal framework for improvement that can serve as a reference.

4. Practical Challenges: Specific Manifestations of Obstacles to the Transition to Normalized Oversight

4.1 Absence of Legal Responsibilities

Law enforcement agencies have failed to fulfill their statutory duties of due diligence or risk anticipation during approval processes and other stages, leading to environmental pollution; under current legal norms, the reporting obligations of local functional departments to their corresponding central government departments are unclear and lack binding enforcement, resulting in insufficient legalization of information-sharing mechanisms and creating de facto obstacles in the exercise of jurisdiction.

4.2 Lack of Stability in the Legal Order

The fact that environmental governance has fallen into the trap of "crackdown-style" law enforcement essentially stems from a rupture in "normative expectations" within the operation of the law. From a legal philosophy perspective, the vitality of the law lies in its stable guidance of social behavior; however, current environmental regulation exhibits severe "spatio-temporal fragmentation": in the temporal dimension, the intensity of law enforcement fluctuates dramatically with inspection cycles, and the implementation of the law lacks consistent temporal effectiveness; spatially, enforcement standards vary between central and local authorities, and the phenomenon of "policies from above, countermeasures from below" undermines the uniformity of legal application. This disconnect makes it difficult for enterprises to form stable expectations regarding compliance and even fosters a "wait-and-see mentality"-where environmental protection investments are viewed as temporary costs incurred to pass inspections rather than statutory, routine obligations. When the enforcement of laws relies heavily on ad hoc political mobilization rather than being embedded in a stable institutional logic, the legal order loses its ability to sustain itself. Governance effectiveness inevitably declines sharply as administrative resources are withdrawn, making it difficult for environmental rule of law to break free from the path dependency of "treating symptoms rather than root causes" and delaying the institutionalization of reforms toward an ecological civilization.

4.3 Dualistic Regulatory System

4.3.1 The lack of smooth coordination between internal regulations/policies and national laws creates an institutional gap in the conversion of inspection rectification requirements into binding legal liabilities

Scholar Ji Pengfei pointed out that establishing a mechanism to coordinate internal regulations with relevant legal systems in the field of central ecological and environmental protection inspections is the foundation for ensuring the legitimacy and standardization of the central ecological and environmental protection inspection system; a comprehensive system of internal regulations and a supporting system of legal norms are necessary conditions for ensuring that the central ecological and environmental protection inspection system operates on a regular basis, achieves tangible results, and develops in a self-sustaining manner.The authority of the Central Ecological and Environmental Protection Inspections stems from the centralized and unified leadership of the Central Committee. Their core legal basis, the Provisions on the Work of Central Ecological and Environmental Protection Inspections, falls within the scope of internal regulations and possesses extremely high political authority and organizational binding force. However, within the framework of the rule of law, the transmission of this authority to external legal liabilities of enterprises faces structural obstacles at the normative level.

4.3.2 Mismatch in the Scope of Regulation

Inspection and rectification requirements primarily regulate internal organizational relationships (between higher-level and lower-level leadership committees, and between organizational bodies and leading officials) and impose strong constraints on local governments through the "joint responsibility of the

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leadership and government" mechanism. However, for non-member enterprise entities, the legal effect of internal regulations is limited by legal principles, making it difficult to directly establish legal obligations vis-à-vis third parties.

4.3.3 Discontinuity in the Conversion of Liability

The basis for rectifying violations identified during inspections-such as circumvention of capacity replacement requirements-often consists of policy documents or requirements set forth in internal regulations. When such conduct does not directly violate explicit prohibitions in national laws such as the Environmental Protection Law or the Air Pollution Prevention and Control Law, law enforcement agencies find it difficult to directly convert these violations into administrative penalties, civil damages, or criminal liability. This results in enterprises facing a double standard of "political compliance" versus "legal compliance," creating room for them to circumvent substantive regulation through technical means.

The aforementioned practical dilemmas are, in essence, a concentrated manifestation of insufficient legal and institutional provisions during the transition from "campaign-style" inspections to "routine" regulation. The following section will analyze these issues in terms of their practical manifestations, underlying causes, and paths to improvement."

5. Legal Causes: The Deep-Seated Legal and Institutional Roots of the Transition Dilemma

5.1 Differences in the Legal Interests Pursued

From the perspective of the principal-agent relationship, the governance conflicts arising from inconsistent central-local objectives and information asymmetry have become the direct cause of the bureaucratic system's inability to achieve the expected governance outcomes. Under pressure from performance evaluations and fiscal constraints, some local governments have been found to falsify environmental monitoring data or even interfere with or manipulate such data (Li Yao, 2024). The central government requires local authorities to implement ecological and environmental protection based on the Environmental Protection Law and the Provisions on Central Ecological and Environmental Protection Inspections, while local governments, in addition to complying with the Environmental Protection Law, must also fulfill broader functions related to economic development and social stability, such as those stipulated in the Employment Promotion Law. This has led to a conflict in the prioritization of these dual obligations; the "discrepancy in performance targets between the central and local governments" manifests legally as a tension in the allocation of powers and responsibilities between "unified supervision" (prioritizing environmental quality) and "comprehensive local management" (balancing both environmental protection and development). The central government, relying on the Environmental Protection Law and internal regulations governing inspections, imposes a singular obligation on grassroots authorities to "strictly enforce environmental laws"; meanwhile, local authorities, based on the Organization Law and development-related laws, bear multiple statutory responsibilities spanning the environment, the economy, and society. Since higher-level laws do not clearly define the priority between "environmental legal interests" and "developmental legal interests," grassroots law enforcement agencies face conflicts in fulfilling these dual legal obligations in individual cases. They are forced to make an either-or choice between "political accountability risks" and "local governance realities," thereby undermining the uniformity and predictability of legal application.This "campaign-style approach" is essentially a stress response under a pressure-driven system: when limited local governance resources cannot offset the daunting nature of rectification tasks, or when the mandatory legal objectives of higher-level inspections conflict with the practical considerations of local economic development, local governments tend to replace routine rule-of-law-based oversight with "campaign-style" measures that bypass standard procedures.

5.2 Insufficient Development of "Procedural Legal Norms" to Support the Performance of Duties and Accountability

At its core, this reflects the traditional legislative mindset of "prioritizing substance over procedure" in the field of environmental governance. Consequently, the law lacks detailed guidance and constraints on the exercise of administrative power (including information flow, risk assessment, and due diligence), causing "statutory duties" to remain unfulfilled

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due to a lack of procedural safeguards and rendering "information sharing" ineffective due to the absence of legal enforcement. Ultimately, this creates a governance dilemma characterized by "duties without procedures; power without information." Furthermore, there is a lack of legal procedures under the principle of "joint responsibility of the leadership and the government": While inspections and accountability emphasize "joint responsibility of the leadership and the government," there is a procedural gap regarding how to transform political responsibility into clear, enforceable legal liability through statutory procedures (particularly regarding accountability for local leadership committees).

5.3 Lack of Long-Term Mechanisms in the Legal Framework:

5.3.1 Insufficient Supply of Legal Rules

Currently, the Central Ecological and Environmental Protection Inspection, through the strong intervention of central authority, sends clear and powerful political signals to local governments, compelling them to enhance their environmental governance capabilities. (Li Yao, 2024) While this leads to noticeable improvements in the short term, signs of a "rebound" immediately emerge once the inspection work concludes. Inspections conducted under pressure from central authority lack stable legal rules regarding criteria for initiating inspections, investigative procedures, and the judicial validity of enforcement decisions, making it difficult to "embed" them within the framework of routine legal governance. Consequently, it is challenging to establish normalized oversight and sustain the achievements of these inspections.

5.3.2 Low Level of Legalization in Incentive and Constraint Mechanisms

Looking back at the history of China's ecological and environmental governance, there have been numerous institutional arrangements aimed at enforcing local governments' responsibilities-such as performance evaluations for environmental protection, comprehensive environmental inspections, and environmental protection interviews. (Jiang Yating, 2023) However, due to the influence of promotion incentives and insufficient constraints, the transition toward routine oversight of central ecological and environmental protection inspections faces obstacles. Currently, environmental incentives (such as fiscal support) and constraints (such as accountability) for local governments largely rely on policy documents and have not been fully transformed into stable legal rights and obligations, leading to unstable behavioral expectations.

5.4 Differences in the Sources and Nature of Power Legitimacy Lead to a "Break in the Power Transmission Chain"

5.4.1 Differences in Sources and Nature

Internal regulations and national laws belong to different normative systems, with fundamental differences in the sources of their power legitimacy, enactment procedures, scope of regulation, and accountability mechanisms. The efficacy of internal regulations stems from organizational discipline and the principle of democratic centralism; their core function is to regulate the work and activities of organizational bodies as well as the conduct of organizational members, with accountability primarily taking the form of political and disciplinary responsibility. Their scope of regulation is primarily limited to "internal organizational relations". The authority of state laws derives from the Constitution and the mandate of the people; their function is to regulate the rights and obligations of the entire society, and the forms of accountability are legal liabilities . Their scope of regulation covers all social entities.

5.4.2 "Segregation" Leads to a "Discontinuity"

When inspectors issue rectification requirements to local governments (primarily leadership committees) based on internal regulations, such requirements operate within the framework of "internal organizational relations" and "political responsibility" and carry significant weight. However, when rectification involves direct regulation of external market entities (enterprises), it exceeds the primary scope of internal regulations. To transform "internal organizational" political requirements into legal sanctions against "non-member" market entities, it is necessary to rely on the mediation and conversion of state laws. If state laws lack corresponding, explicit mandatory provisions and sanction clauses, a "break in the chain of power transmission" is created.

5.5 The "Absence" of Legal Procedural Rules and the Hollowing Out of the "Referral" Mechanism

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5.5.1 Absence of Procedural Rules

The current legal system lacks general, universal procedural rules for "incorporating" internal regulations or policy requirements into state legal procedures. For example, the law does not specify under what conditions and through what procedures the facts established in an inspection report may be directly used as evidence in administrative penalties or judicial rulings. It also does not clarify how rectification requirements proposed by inspections trigger case-filing and investigation procedures by administrative law enforcement agencies, nor does it set clear statutory time limits. Furthermore, it does not outline how to initiate legal investigation procedures-distinct from internal disciplinary sanctions-against non-member enterprise executives who violate inspection rectification requirements.

5.5.2 Vague "Referral" Provisions: Even where some laws contain phrases such as "violation of national regulations," these provisions are typically too general, lacking operational elements of the offense and legal consequences. This results in law enforcement and judicial authorities being "unable to use" or "unwilling to use" them. Policy requirements cannot be automatically and seamlessly "referred" to legal liability.

6. Path to Improvement: Building a Rule-of-Law-Based, Regularized Regulatory System

6.1 Establishing a Rule-of-Law Framework for "Balancing Legal Interests"

Legislation should establish the principle of balancing interests under the condition of "environmental priority": Add provisions to the Environmental Protection Law that, as a matter of principle, stipulate that environmental protection takes precedence when major, irreconcilable conflicts arise between economic development and environmental protection. These provisions should also provide legal guidance and procedural channels for local authorities to conduct nuanced balancing in specific circumstances (e.g., through regional planning and environmental impact assessments), thereby alleviating conflicts of obligations at the grassroots level.

6.2 Filling Gaps in Procedural Legal Norms to Achieve Dual "Substantive–Procedural" Regulation

6.2.1 Legislatively Establish "Process-Oriented Control" Rules

Through the revision of the Environmental Protection Law or the enactment of the Regulations on Ecological and Environmental Supervision Procedures, specifically stipulate the procedural obligations of law enforcement agencies regarding "prudent review" and "risk anticipation" during stages such as approval and licensing. Clarify the content, standards, processes, and written record-keeping requirements for such reviews, thereby transforming substantive responsibilities into verifiable and accountable procedural steps.

6.2.2 Establishing Statutory and Binding Procedures for Information Reporting and Sharing

Through legislation, clearly define the scope, deadlines, formats, and verification procedures for information reporting from local to central authorities and between departments. Establish failure to report, false reporting, and delayed reporting as independent grounds for legal liability, directly linking them to performance evaluations and accountability measures, thereby eliminating "information silos" and jurisdictional barriers.

6.3 Promote the Legalization and Standardization of Inspection Authority Operations to Fill Gaps in Regulatory Provisions

6.3.1 Legalization of Powers and Procedures

Promote the formulation of the Regulations on Central Ecological and Environmental Protection Inspections to clarify, through legal means, the nature, subjects, scope of authority, activation criteria, investigation procedures, and legal effect of inspection decisions. Establish a "list of authorized powers" and a "negative list" to clearly delineate the boundaries between inspection authority and routine law enforcement authority.

6.3.2 Transforming "Policy Requirements" into "Legal Rules"

For industrial policies proven effective through inspection practice, promptly elevate their core requirements-such as equivalent reduction standards and joint supervision mechanisms-to universally binding legal norms by amending overarching laws such as the Law on Environmental Impact Assessment and the Law on the Prevention and Control of Air Pollution,

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or by enacting administrative regulations, thereby plugging legal loopholes that allow for "compliance evasion."

6.4 Improving Long-Term Mechanisms for Collaborative Governance to Transition from "Campaign-Style Collaboration" to "Routine Coordination"

6.4.1 Establishing a Statutory Framework for Interdepartmental Collaborative Governance Through Legislation

Relevant laws should explicitly stipulate that for environmental issues spanning regions, river basins, or media, a statutory joint governance mechanism led by higher-level governments or designated departments must be established, and responsibilities and procedures for information sharing, joint law enforcement, and emergency response should be refined.

6.4.2 Transforming Inspection Pressure into a Driving Force for Local Legislation and Governance Innovation

Encourage and empower local governments to address systemic and regional issues identified through inspections by enacting local legislation, formulating medium- and long-term plans, and innovating regulatory tools (such as ecological compensation and emissions trading). This will internalize central government requirements into long-term governance mechanisms tailored to local realities, thereby achieving continuous improvement in governance capabilities.

6.5 Promoting the Deep Institutionalization of Internal Regulations to Build a "Dual-Track Synergy" Foundation for the Rule of Law

In terms of mechanism integration, establish statutory linkage mechanisms within internal regulations between inspection accountability, supervisory investigations, and judicial prosecution to ensure that political responsibility can be transformed into legal responsibility through stable procedures, thereby forming a synergistic disciplinary force comprising internal disciplinary actions, administrative sanctions, and criminal sanctions. Through the self-regulation of internal regulations, the aim is to channel strong political momentum into a stable and transparent institutional framework, thereby forming a normalized governance structure that complements and synergizes with the national legal framework. This will ultimately achieve a lasting balance and efficient operation of "supervision of government affairs" and "law enforcement" within the framework of the rule of law.

7. Conclusion

This study conducts an in-depth examination of the legal challenges and potential improvements regarding the transition of the Central Ecological and Environmental Protection Inspection System toward routine oversight, focusing on four aspects: the formulation of the issue, practical challenges, legal-theoretical causes, and paths to improvement. It provides a thorough analysis of the legal-theoretical causes underlying the practical challenges of absent legal responsibilities, a lack of stability in the legal order, and a dualistic regulatory framework. Based on these legal-theoretical causes-including differences in the legal interests pursued, the inadequate development of "procedural legal norms" that underpin the fulfillment of duties and the enforcement of accountability, and the absence of long-term mechanisms for legal construction-this study proposes corresponding improvement pathways: establishing a rule-of-law framework based on the "balancing of legal interests," filling gaps in procedural legal norms to achieve dual regulation of "substance and procedure," advancing the legalization and standardization of the exercise of inspection authority, and addressing gaps in the supply of regulatory rules. This study resolves the legal challenges associated with the transition of the Central Ecological and Environmental Protection Inspection System toward routine oversight and offers valuable insights for future research on the system, with the aim of promoting its further improvement.

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