

**ARE THE *NONGGUAN* COMING?  
THE EVOLUTION OF THE  
RURAL COMPREHENSIVE  
ADMINISTRATIVE  
ENFORCEMENT TEAM IN  
CHINA'S RURAL GOVERNANCE**

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In April 2023, videos featuring uniformed rural enforcement teams known as *nongguan* 农管 forcefully confiscating farmers' livestock or taking down trees went viral on Chinese social media. 'The *nongguan* are coming!' 农管来了 became a trending topic, often followed by the phrase 'the peasants are panicking' 农民慌了.<sup>1</sup>

*Nongguan* is the unofficial name for the rural comprehensive administrative enforcement teams 农业综合行政执法队 ('rural enforcement team' hereafter), whose responsibility is to supervise and improve law enforcement in China's vast countryside. People use the term *nongguan* to show they view these teams as the rural equivalent of the infamous *chengguan* 城管, the urban management and law enforcement force, which has been often criticised for harassing and bullying street vendors in urban areas, causing injuries and even deaths.<sup>2</sup> The fact that the *nongguan* wear similar official uniforms to *chengguan* further reinforces public concern that *nongguan* are overly empowered and bound to behave as negatively as *chengguan*. Subsequently, rumours such as 'the *nongguan* are collecting property management fees' or 'the *nongguan* are making peasants apply for licences to farm' began to spread online, expressing widespread anxiety over the extent of the *nongguan*'s power and jurisdiction over rural areas today.

In fact, rural enforcement teams are not new. When the 1993 Agricultural Law was revised in 2002, the revision indicated that 'the Agricultural Departments of county and higher-level governments shall, within their jurisdiction, improve the construction of administrative enforcement teams that shall practice comprehensive administrative enforcement and improve the efficiency and standard of enforcement'.<sup>3</sup> My field research reveals that many places have had rural enforcement teams for more than two decades. For example, in a county in China's coastal Zhejiang province, rural enforcement teams were established in 1998 under the county's Agriculture Department; their main task was to supervise the 'agricultural product shops' 农资店, ensuring that the products they sell, such as seeds and fertiliser, were certified. Other county bureaus, such as the Department of Water Resources and the Department of Forestry, also had their own enforcement teams whose tasks involved rural law enforcement. In one county in Anhui province, the task of enforcing rural laws was

shared by the county's Agricultural Department, Forestry Department and Animal Husbandry Bureau, each of them forming their own independent enforcement teams. Hence, although rural enforcement teams have long existed in China, their bureaucratic affiliation and scope of enforcement has varied from place to place.



**Many places in China have had rural enforcement teams for more than two decades**

Source: Rod Waddington, Flickr

In 2018, following the Third Plenary Session of the 19th CPC Central Committee, the central government initiated a comprehensive reform of rural enforcement teams, which aimed to integrate the jurisdiction and forces relevant to rural enforcement that had been scattered among a variety of bureaus or departments into the rural enforcement team, highlighting the team's 'comprehensive' 综合 feature.<sup>4</sup> Earlier that year, the Ministry of Agriculture was replaced by the newly created Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, with the new ministry integrating some of the management responsibilities previously under the jurisdiction of other bodies such as the Ministry of Land and Resources, the Ministry of Water Resources and

the National Development and Reform Commission, which also became directly responsible for managing rural enforcement teams.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, the teams at the local levels were required to use the unified name of 'rural comprehensive administrative enforcement teams', and their jurisdiction and staff were adjusted in accordance with the reforms. A county government in Shandong province, for example, established a new rural enforcement team on the basis of the county's Agriculture Department's Office of Fertiliser Management and selected a team of staff from the county's Department of Comprehensive Administrative Enforcement to join the team.

Subsequently, the central government issued a series of documents to institutionalise the rural enforcement teams. In 2020, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs issued the 'Catalogue of Tasks for Rural Comprehensive Administrative Enforcement' 农业综合行政执法事项指导目录 to clarify the teams' duties.<sup>6</sup> These run to a total of 251 items relating to fertiliser, seeds, animal husbandry, agricultural machinery, fishing and land use. Most items belong to the traditional duties of rural enforcement teams to maintain a healthy rural market and production environment, but supervising land use appears to be a new task. According to the catalogue, rural enforcement teams now need to supervise two types of rural land: farmland 耕地 and residential land 宅基地, and to focus on two types of illegal activity: (1) the illegal possession of farmland for non-farming purposes and damage to 'growing conditions' 种植条件 (Item 222) and (2) illegal possession of residential land by individual households (Item 223). Notably, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs has, on several occasions, stressed that the rural enforcement teams must follow the catalogue and not overstep their jurisdictions.<sup>7</sup>

Other central documents have focused on the enforcement processes of rural enforcement teams. In 2021, the 'Regulations on the Process of Rural Administration Sanction' 农业行政处罚程序规定 were issued, which stipulated how rural enforcement teams should handle and impose administration sanctions.<sup>8</sup> In 2022, the 'Guidelines for the Basic Equipment of Rural Administrative Enforcement' 全国农业行政执法基本装备配备指导标准 listed five main categories: (1) 'basic equipment', such as law enforcement vehicles and agricultural product rapid inspection vehicles 农产品快速检

验车; (2) ‘evidence collection equipment’, such as body and other digital cameras; (3) ‘emergency equipment’, such as satellite phones and handheld megaphones; (4) ‘self-protection equipment’, such as protective clothing and first aid kits; (5) and ‘other equipment’, such as signal jammers.<sup>9</sup> The rural enforcement teams can also discretionally select some of this equipment ‘depending on their work needs’ 根据工作需要配备. In 2023, the ‘Management Measures on Rural Comprehensive Administrative Enforcement’ 农业综合行政执法指导办法 further elaborated on the process, standard and methods for the purpose of ‘reinforcing the management of rural administrative enforcement organizations and staff’ and ‘regulating rural enforcement behaviors’.<sup>10</sup>

These new documents suggest that while the party-state sees rural enforcement teams as vital to rural governance, it also realises the importance of regulating them. This is indeed important considering the types of tasks rural enforcement teams carry out and how they deal directly with rural residents. As the catalogue indicates, the rural enforcement teams are expected to continue to play their traditional role in combating counterfeit rural products and maintaining a healthy market for rural products. According to the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, between 2020 and 2022, they helped prevent economic losses to farmers of nearly RMB 1.5 billion.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, rural enforcement teams have been assigned more tasks that they previously did not need to carry out, such as supervising rural land. In the county in Zhejiang where I conducted fieldwork, the rural enforcement team did not need to deal with illegal construction on rural residential land before the reform, which used to fall under the jurisdiction of the county’s Department of Land and Resources. When I visited in October 2023, it had become an essential part of their work.

It also appears that the party-state increasingly views rural enforcement teams as essential to strengthening food security, a top priority for the leadership. In March 2023, a nationwide campaign for guaranteeing food supply involving the administrative enforcement teams kicked off with a conference in Changsha, Hunan province. There, the Deputy Minister of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, Deng Xiaogang 邓小刚, stated that the campaign’s goal was to mobilise the rural enforcement teams to devote themselves to

‘safeguarding’ 保驾护航 national food security.<sup>12</sup> An interesting coincidence is that while the comprehensive reforms around rural enforcement began in 2018, it was after April 2023, not long after this campaign launch, that videos of *nongguan*’s intrusive actions went viral on the internet—leading to the widespread misunderstanding that the *nongguan* had just been created. Some videos purported to show *nongguan* destroying vegetable farms and cutting down fruit trees, although they came from unconfirmed sources. Some netizens attributed such actions to the ‘Returning Forest to Farmland’ 退林还耕 policy for increasing grain production. It remains unclear whether such actions are in line with central government expectations or whether they reflected arbitrary local government decisions. In September 2023, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs published a report titled *Successful Cases of ‘Guaranteeing Food Supply’ Conducted by Rural Enforcement Teams* 全国农业综合行政执法‘稳粮保供’典型案例.<sup>13</sup> All the examples were about the combating of fake or uncertified rural products. None involved land.



**Rural enforcement teams are viewed as essential to strengthening food security**

Source: Matt Briney, Unsplash

The party-state has clearly noticed the negative perceptions of rural enforcement teams among the general public. Also in September 2023, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs held another conference on ‘Constructing the Work Style of the Rural Comprehensive Administrative Enforcement Team’ 农业综合行政执法队伍作风建设座谈会, which stressed the importance of following principles such as ‘enforcement in accordance with the law’ 依法执法 and using ‘civilised methods’ 文明执法.<sup>14</sup> However, to what degree the rural enforcement teams will abide by these requirements and rules remains a critical issue. In the management of *chengguan*, although the central government has also required them to conduct ‘fair and civilised law enforcement’ 公正文明执法, coercive and excessive enforcement actions still often occur, giving rise to intense social unrest. The causes are, of course, complex, including uneven qualifications 素质 among *chengguan* staff, weak supervision, and intensive pressure imposed by top-down evaluations. These issues may likewise exist for managing rural enforcement teams, with some of them even more difficult to tackle considering that they are enforcing laws that exist at the grassroots level of China, in other words, furthest from the central government. Hence the question: are the *nongguan* coming? The answer likely depends on whether the party-state can effectively develop its capacity to manage and supervise these enforcement staff, which often not only entails efforts from the state but also the empowerment of peasants.



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