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The Double-edged Sword of Digital Governance in China:
Can digital governance enhance the legitimacy of authoritarian regimes?

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Abstract

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China has actively adopted digital technology and launched administrative service centers to improve the government's administrative efficiency and provide corresponding social services, thereby achieving the goal of accumulating legitimacy of power. With the nationwide coverage of administrative service centers, the public's satisfaction with the government has also increased. However, in the process of the active adoption of digital technology, the digital economy has become the protagonist, and governing society through digital means has become a technical activity. Overemphasizing the efficiency of digital governance has instead made the government overlook the meaningful interaction between the state and the people, though that may be less efficient.

Introduction

In the battle against the COVID-19, China's use of digital technology has often been reported in the media. Various technologies have been adopted, such as drones that notify people who are outside, QR codes that prove the health status using smartphones, and surveillance cameras with facial recognition capabilities to identify close contacts. China's zero COVID policy was very strict, and the application of high-tech technology has made it possible to detect and isolate infected individuals early and maintain low levels of infection(李 2023).

However, as the Omicron variant emerged, policy adjustments could not keep up, and eventually, large-scale lockdowns were implemented throughout the country (BBC News 2022). The situation, where every aspect of personal freedom was restricted, from monitoring actions through advanced technology to physical movement restrictions, has led to a comparison with an Orwellian police state (金 2022). However, confusion in society continued, as the zero COVID policy faced an unexpected backlash through protests against the lockdown. What kind of impact has the zero COVID policy had on Chinese society in the past three years? The overall picture is still unknown. The only confirmed fact is that it was a period when the surveillance of individuals by the state escalated to an extreme level, with the application of digital technology in state governance also reaching its peak. Therefore, it is the best time to discuss the topic of digital technology and politics in contemporary China.

Of course, the discussion on digital technology and politics in China goes beyond the battle against the novel Coronavirus. The state's involvement through the use of digital technology can be seen in various aspects such as the Great Firewall that blocks internet access (Griffiths 2021), the censorship that removes sensitive keywords online (Pan 2017; Yuan 2019), the social credit system that monitors individuals and corporations (Xu, Kostka, and Cao 2022), involvement of high-tech companies in overseas listings (Zhong 2021), identification of protest participants using facial recognition technology (Mozur, Fu, and Chien 2022), and the race for supremacy in AI technology (Zeng 2020, 2022).

Why is the Chinese government so committed to adopting digital technology? If we overly emphasize the state's operation of tracking technology interfering with personal freedom, our

discussion can easily fall into the relationship between the Orwellian-style state and society, where ordinary people fear Big Brother and become obedient children (今野 2022; 梶谷 and 高口 2019). In other words, the use of digital technology imparts greater stability to authoritarian systems. Works on authoritarian Internet control, both academic and advocacy-oriented, often overlook these dynamics because they generally focus on the policies of single states (Michaelsen and Glasius 2018).

Authoritarian regimes always face the issues of the effectiveness and legitimacy of their rule. Overemphasizing the governance effect brought by technology will lead to overlooking the discussion on the legitimacy of governance. The development of the economy and society after the reform and opening up is the main source of the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which is also constantly committed to improving the quality of public services. China's steady rise in the ranking of digital government in the United Nations, from a digital-governance-backward country to a quasi-advanced country, is the best example. Therefore, when discussing why China actively adopts digital technology, it is necessary to consider both the effectiveness and legitimacy of governance.

1， Dilemma of the authoritarian regime and digital governance

Popular support is the most important foundation for the CCP's legitimacy. Mainstream scholars believe that legitimacy can be achieved by providing effective economic and social development (林 2009), which in turn can be attained through state mobilization (冯 2011)， or regular governance (渠, 周, and 应 2009). Some scholars believe that when the state pursues extraordinary performance requirements, effective means always lag behind the state's social transformation needs. Therefore, the state cannot push forward social transformation step by step, but must continuously break through institutional, conventional, and professional boundaries according to the need, to 'mobilize all positive factors to serve the socialist cause' (冯 2011; 蔡 2012). There have been many studies on how the CCP uses movement-style governance

in the ruling process, and this does not need reiteration. However, the lack of effective means stems from the dilemma of authoritarian regimes.

According to Zhou (2011), achieving effective governance in authoritarian countries, particularly those like China with a large land area, population size, and uneven regional development, faces significant dilemmas. Specifically, policies and institutions that reflect the central government's intentions may not be faithfully or effectively implemented at the local level due to factors such as conflicting interests or local realities that do not align with the policies. Additionally, the central government cannot effectively monitor the behavior of grassroots governments that do not implement policies effectively. Therefore, the central government attempts to achieve effective governance by strengthening centralization, but this can result in policies divorced from grassroots realities or the delegation of authority to local governments that may deviate from the central government's intentions (周 2011).

This discussion is based on a traditional framework of political and sociological analysis, focusing on the challenges faced by China's institutional arrangements, including the relationship between the central and local governments, issues within the bureaucratic system, and the resulting problems in the relationship between the state and society. The premise of their discussion is that the central government does not have a precise knowledge of the situation in various departments and regions and is hence unable to fully consider the diversity of different regions in the policy-making process. This has led to many deviations in the implementation of specific policies and a lack of their timely detection and correction.

What if we assume that the central government has accurate knowledge of the situation in every department and region? If all information is available on a unified network, and the central government can monitor the situation across the country in real-time, can it adjust policies timely and supervise the implementation of policies by local governments through digital means, thereby achieving effective policy implementation? From the perspective of local governments, if they have sufficient information, can they interact more effectively with the central government and society, thereby achieving better local governance?

In Chinese political research, it is common to observe games played between various levels of government, which can consume significant time and energy. After the Reform and Opening

up, the government has consistently addressed this issue and carried out repeated administrative restructuring and institutional reforms. However, due to the vastness of the organization and the complexity of interests, there were limitations to the reforms. That is where the construction of e-government using digital technology came into play. At that time, it was not yet about big data but rather started from the level of grasping and sharing more accurate numbers.

2，Public service center and improvement of government efficiency

We briefly define digital governance. The term "e-government" commonly used in China includes two meanings–"digital governance" and "digital government". The former is used in the European Parliament and the latter in the United Nations.

In the case of the EU, e-governance is about the use of information technology to raise the quality of the services governments deliver to citizens and businesses. It is also envisaged to reinforce the connection between public officials and communities, thereby leading to a stronger, more accountable, and inclusive democracy (European Council Web).

On the other hand, the UN defines e-government as everything from 'online government services'' to 'exchange of information and services electronically with citizens, businesses, and other arms of government'. Traditionally, e-government has been considered as the use of ICT for improving the efficiency of government agencies and providing government services online. Later, the framework of e-government was broadened to include the use of ICT by the government for conducting a wide range of interactions with citizens and businesses, as well as open government data and the use of ICT to enable innovation in governance (UN e-government knowledge base).

Although their focuses differ, there is a consensus on providing better administrative services. In China, the concepts of digital government and digital administration are often used interchangeably. Official documents mention that "improving the level of digital government construction （提高数字政府建设水平）" emphasizes the wide application of digital technology in government management services to improve the efficiency of digital administrative services". China's advocated digital government or digital administration focuses

more on providing better administrative services to citizens and improving administrative efficiency through digital means. In contrast, the European Parliament emphasizes using digital administration to achieve a more inclusive democracy, while in China, it means using digital technology to participate in government proposals and other aspects. In the following section, we will examine China's digital governance development by tracing the evolution of administrative service centers[1].

In the first place, until the mid-1990s, there were hardly any comprehensive service windows (places that provide administrative services similar to those of a Japanese city hall) in government offices in China. At that time, each government department worked in multiple locations, and it was necessary to visit several places to obtain official documents[2]. Administrative services during this period were remnants of the planned economy era and closely related to the household registration system. The application process for administrative services (mainly certificates and permits then) started with a referral letter from the household registration location and required visits to multiple government department windows. Any deficiencies in the documents during the application process caused the application to be returned to the beginning stage. Cross-regional provision of administrative services was almost non-existent, and people who were away from their household registration location had to travel long distances to obtain certificates.

During this period, the central government had insufficient knowledge of various national data, from total population to tax revenue; they had only a general understanding and did not have even an accurate grasp of the country's cultivated land area. It was precisely because the central government had an insufficient understanding of the actual situation that while implementing the tax-sharing reform in the 1990s, they deliberately increased the tax rates to ensure the central government's fiscal revenue (程 and 于 2023).

During the Hu Jintao era (2002-2012), the central government of China promoted the establishment of administrative service centers (referred to as "zheng wu da ting(政务大厅)" or

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[1] A portion of the content has previously appeared in another short piece by the author(任 2020).

[2] In the latter half of the 1990s, attempts were made to establish comprehensive service windows in Guangdong Province, Zhejiang Province, and other regions. However, these were intended not to provide services to local residents, but rather to attract foreign investment. To establish factories in China, foreign companies needed to go through various examination procedures, and comprehensive service windows specialized in meeting those needs were established.

" zheng fu fu wu zhong xin(政府服务中心)") in major cities with the mantra of "service-oriented government(服务型政府)." The aim was to consolidate the functions of various departments that had been working independently into these administrative service centers, for improving administrative efficiency. At the same time, it was hoped that the public's satisfaction with the government would also increase. However, the promotion of administrative service centers did not proceed smoothly. First, their establishment was limited to major cities and economically developed areas and not nationwide. Second, although administrative tasks were carried out at these centers, the scope of their operations was very limited and remained largely formalistic. Further, people complained of there being too many service counters, making it difficult to approach the correct counter. In other words, while the number of departments with administrative service centers increased, each department continued to operate independently, and cooperation did not progress as expected.

Although collaborative work did not progress, the application of digital technology within government agencies rapidly advanced and each department constructed its own business platforms, one after the other. However, data networking during this period still remained at the provincial or even lower government levels, and had not yet been fully implemented nationwide. For example, the national networking construction for tax collection and management of the State Administration of Taxation did not begin until 2009, and it was not until 2016 that full national coverage was truly achieved. The use of digital technology allowed government agencies to obtain more information and laid a good foundation for providing better administrative services[3]. The widespread use of second-generation ID cards and real-name registration in various services also began during this period.

As the TAMs (Technology Acceptance Models), and UTAUT (Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology) suggest, when users are satisfied with the convenience brought by new

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[3] In the sixth national census conducted in 2010, the Chinese government discovered that 13 million people did not have a household registration, also known as hukou, and the vast majority of them were unable to register due to exceeding the birth limit(超生). Without a hukou, they were unable to obtain an identification card and were excluded from enjoying legal rights that ordinary citizens have, such as attending school, finding employment, getting married, and buying property, and were naturally excluded from the digital governance system. In order to establish a national population database, the central government decided to register these people without hukou in 2015 (People's Daily, February 13, 2017).

technology, they are more inclined to use it(Kostka, Steinacker, and Meckel 2021). Chinese digital enterprises advanced rapidly during this time and began to provide leading convenience services (ALIPAY for example), giving ordinary people a sense of superiority from becoming advanced, from being backward. Considering the inefficient administrative services in China during the 1990s and the improvement of government service functions during this period, people are more convinced that digital technology can bring more benefits to daily life. Therefore, from the ordinary people's perspective, the government's grasp of personal information and data networking was almost synchronous, and the topics of personal privacy and big data were not yet major concerns. This was also a time of rapid expansion for Chinese internet users. The swift rise of various online media, especially Weibo, enabled the rapid formation of public opinion, and also enabled observers to see that the popularization of the internet could help the formation of civil society (Huang and Sun 2014).

Under Xi Jinping's leadership, the spread of administrative windows continued to advance, expanding from major cities to small and medium-sized ones, and from coastal areas across the country. A national survey on administrative windows was conducted in 2017 to verify the policy's effectiveness and found the installation rate at the county level to have reached 94%. Further, branch offices were established at the bottom of the administrative hierarchy, such as in communities and villages, making it easier for residents to use them. During this period, the central government set the ambitious goal of "one window, one-stop service." Achieving this goal requires not only strengthening cooperation between government departments but also sharing various types of data. However, China's administrative organization is constantly plagued by the problems of vertical and horizontal administration, and overcoming these obstacles is not easy. Therefore, digital technology has been attracting attention.

Regarding the application of ICT by the government, examples include the services provided by platforms such as WeChat and ALIPAY. These are relatively new, with the addition of the public account function (for government agencies) on the WeChat app in 2012 being the first. In response, government departments and related agencies at all levels, from central to local, began creating official accounts and disseminating information. Examples include the Hangzhou city government's official account, as well as official accounts for related departments such as the

public security bureau, civil affairs bureau, and transportation bureau. Some departments, such as the Shenzhen city government, have even developed their own mobile apps to provide administrative services. However, each service is provided independently by each department, with different formats and no shared data. To achieve the goal of "one window, one-stop service", it is necessary to consolidate all existing platforms that cover the scope of administrative services into a single platform and link it to the progress of work at the administrative window. This would enable all aspects of the process, from advance reservations to the progress of work, to be checked online.

Let us introduce the platform provided by Hangzhou City in Zhejiang Province. It is a mini program (a lightweight app within a chat app) that can be used on the WeChat app, and there is no need to download a separate app. Users need only follow the official account of the Hangzhou City Government. If personal information is required, it can be used after verifying the user's identity (ID card or bank card in the user's name).

The services provided through the platform include housing-related services (housing provident fund, registration certification, real estate transfer, etc.), social security and transportation-related services (license plate lottery results, parking lots), entry and exit-related services (passport, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau pass), household registration- and education-related services (academic credentials, libraries, etc.), qualification certification (doctor, pharmacist, etc.), legal consultation, medical-related services (hospital reservations, epidemic information, etc.), and daily life-related services (garbage collection, postal delivery, weather forecast, traffic information), *inter alia*. Although there are still some functions not officially launched, it can be said that almost all aspects of residents' daily life are covered[4].

3，Government Competition in Platform Services

In Zhejiang province, where Hangzhou is located, various innovative initiatives have been implemented to provide administrative services to residents. The slogan "no more than once"

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[4] There is also a unique feature where citizens can report traffic violations to the police through their mobile devices, making it impossible for drivers to let their guard down.

(Chinese: "最多跑一次"), is an example, which has gained attention in recent years. The city of Hangzhou's platform is a model project for realizing the "at most once" concept. All the necessary documents for various permits and approvals can be checked on the platform, and you only need to apply for the required documents accordingly. This means that you can literally complete all administrative procedures without having to visit a government office more than once.

A more ambitious initiative is that of Guangdong Province, known as "Yue Sheng Shi" (粤省事). This project is led by the Guangdong Provincial Government and jointly established with IT giant Tencent and the three major telecommunications companies (China Mobile, China Unicom, and China Telecom). It is a large-scale effort to consolidate all administrative service functions offered by the government at various levels in Guangdong Province into a single WeChat platform, sharing basic data. As a platform that covers the entire Guangdong Province, it is expected to narrow the regional disparities in administrative services.

The platform was launched in May 2018 with just over 140 functions but has over 2,100 functions now (2022). Its greatest feature is the ability to link with electronic versions of various certificates such as ID cards, driver's licenses, Hong Kong and Macau passes, and insurance cards, which are treated as equivalent to physical copies. Consequently, the so-called "zero-stop" process, which eliminates the need to go to an administrative office for certificate-related matters, has been achieved.

This platform has demonstrated powerful data collection capabilities in preventing the spread of the novel coronavirus. It not only collects personal health data but also gathers various information such as identifying close contacts and supervising prevention measures. Consequently, users can quickly check the latest infection information. This platform has gained popularity and according to the Southern Daily newspaper, received up to 29.4 million daily accesses at its peak.

Not to be outdone by Guangdong Province[5], a platform called "Changjiang Delta Government Service Network" (长三角政务服务一网通办) has been launched under the initiative of Shanghai city to overcome the provincial-level barriers. Cities in the Changjiang (Yangtze) Delta

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[5] At the provincial level, digital government platforms have sprung up all over China. Thirty provinces have launched service platforms on WeChat, and 31 provinces have launched service platforms on Alipay (谢 2023).

like Shanghai, Hangzhou, and Suzhou are the main participants. In addition to the Changjiang Delta, there are also cross-provincial-level services such as Jingjinji (Beijing, Tianjin, and Hebei) and Chuanyu (Sichuan and Chongqing) service networks. Although each platform has a different interface and service level, it supports unified online services at the national level. The State Council is trying to implement a nationwide integrated online government service and has launched a trial version of the national government service platform. Although its functions are limited and many services still rely on the data platform support of provincial governments, we can observe the efforts and achievements of the Chinese government.

The United Nations has been conducting a large-scale e-government survey since 2003, which includes three main aspects: the Online Service Index, the Human Capital Index, and the Telecommunication Infrastructure Index. In the early stages of the survey, China scored high in terms of human resources, but relatively low in the other two areas. However, China's performance has been quite remarkable over the past decade, especially in online administrative services and ICT infrastructure construction (see Figure 1 **UN E-government Index (China)**). Although there is still a long way to go compared to leading European countries, China's achievements are commendable. This also proves from another perspective the efforts made by the Chinese government and how the government has improved administrative efficiency through digital technology[6].

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[6] In technologically advanced Estonia, e-governance can save up to 2% of GDP in expenses (日本経済新聞 2020). China is still at the stage of constructing digital governance and the process is ongoing; hence, the true effects may not become apparent until several years later.
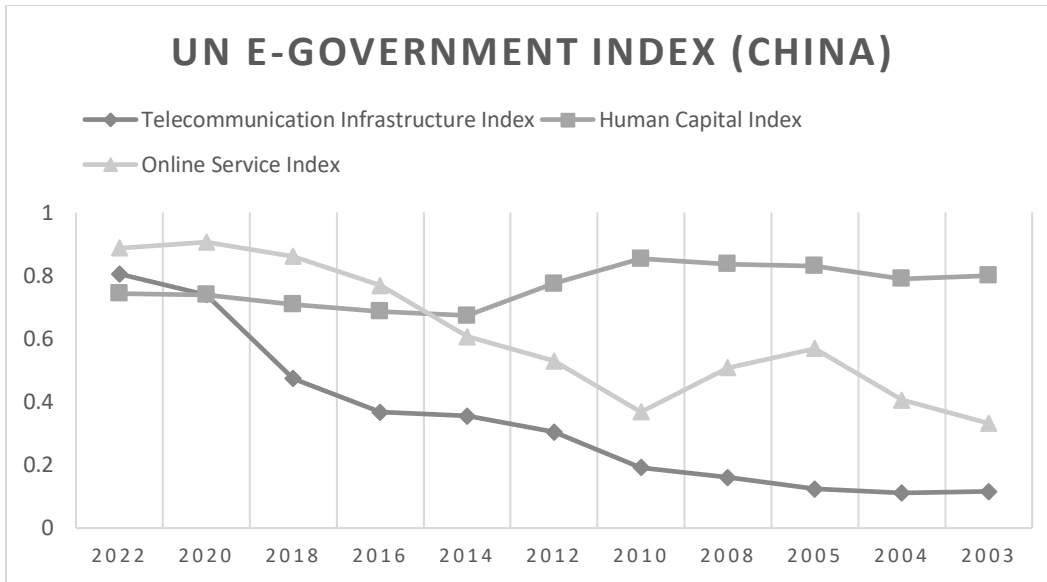
Figure 1 **UN E-government Index (China), data from UN E-government Knowledgebase**

China was able to achieve the "palm-sized administrative window" from a time when there was no comprehensive service center, in less than 20 years. This was not so much an evolution accomplished by local administrative organizations themselves, as it was due to external pressure.

One of these pressures is the presence of a strong central government. The central government not only continues to prioritize the issue of improving the efficiency of administrative organizations but also encourages new initiatives in local areas. Localities that receive encouragement become famous throughout the country as model cases. And the bureaucrats in those localities have their path to promotion opened up. Further, such encouragement creates competition between local governments, leading to further evolution. In this process, many domestic enterprises have participated in the construction of digital governance, which has made the central government realize the importance of digital technology in national governance. From the "Government Work Report" in 2017, which clearly proposed "promoting the accelerated growth of the digital economy", to the report of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, which proposed "accelerating the development of advanced manufacturing, promoting the deep integration of the Internet, big data, artificial intelligence, and the real economy", and then to the "Government Work Report" in 2019, which

proposed "strengthening the digital economy", the position of the digital economy in the national economy has acquired increasing importance (阳 and 樊 2020).

Satisfaction of society is another pressure. Under the slogan of "service-oriented government," the quality of services provided by local governments is evaluated by society. From society's perspective, there is not much interest in the internal affairs of the government (vertical and horizontal administration). What is important is whether the problem can be solved immediately. The central government is also sensitive to evaluations by society and often check local governments based on public satisfaction(秦 2017). Consequently, the visible convenience aspect is often emphasized, and there is competition over whether it is "one-stop" or "zero-stop".

However, no matter how much the external pressure, the "palm-sized administrative window" cannot be realized without digital technology. The increase in the number of functions in the Guangdong Province platform is an example. Various regulations within the government are reviewed and become clearer through the application of IT. In addition, problems such as duplicated functions, ambiguous regulations, and unclear management departments are highlighted in this process and cannot be ignored. However, simply increasing the number of functions on the platform is not the solution. If there are too many, it will be criticized as "difficult to understand" by society. Conversely, if there are too few functions, local governments may be perceived as not making enough effort.

4， Effective accumulation? Or technical sabotage?

The history of the administrative service centers reveals the consistent pursuit of precise numbers by the central government of China, as well as the changing understanding of digital technology during this process. From the central government's perspective, digital technology has gradually evolved from a means of improving administrative efficiency to an important component driving the national economy. We see how local governments use digital technology in specific operational processes to enhance the function of administrative services to meet the ambitious goals set by the central government. In this process, ordinary people are direct

beneficiaries. Due to the visibility and strong operability of the e-government project, ordinary users can evaluate the achievements of their local e-government project (中国计算机用户协会政务信息化分会（电子政务理事会）2021；中央党校（国家行政学院）电子政务研究中心 2022). This can demonstrate why, before the pandemic in China, the government, businesses, and the public achieved a paradoxically high degree of consensus on the issue of big data. Big data is exerting an unprecedented power to influence government decisions, business activities, and even the daily life of the common man (吴婧 and 戚振宇 2018).

As the Chinese government vigorously promotes digital governance, a large amount of government procurement has led to the rapid development of Chinese technology companies, which have become the biggest winners in a market environment without clear legal constraints. These technology companies are also willing to share user data with third parties, mainly government departments, although this has always been a controversial issue. In 2015, Alibaba signed a strategic cooperation framework agreement with the Zhejiang Higher People's Court. The two sides announced that they would use cloud computing, big data, and other means to collaborate to create a "smart court" for the Internet era, to help the court improve efficiency in the areas of service, trial, and execution. To put it simply, when the court's documents cannot be delivered timely, the court can use the identity and related information of relevant personnel within Alibaba's Taobao platform to send judicial documents to the Taobao delivery address, to improve the delivery rate (Initium Media 2015).

Political and legal systems responsible for maintaining social stability and national security are also actively adopting advanced digital technology for solving cases, maintaining social order, etc. (Mozur, Fu, and Chien 2022; Mozur, Xiao, and Liu 2022; 優卡 2023; 孟建国 2019). During his address to the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission on October 21, 2016, Jack Ma of Alibaba spoke on the role of technology innovation in future social governance, focusing on big data. Ma mentioned that the police can use big data to identify suspicious individuals; for example, someone who buys gunpowder, pressure cookers, steel balls, and watches simultaneously may be planning to make a bomb, while someone who has multiple electronic payment records for riding public transportation in a day may be a thief. Ma also mentioned that the future political and legal system cannot be separated from the internet and big data.

According to this preventive thinking, "bad guys simply cannot get into the square."(Initium Media 2016).

Scholars have long pointed out that there is a serious problem of power asymmetry between internet giants and users in China in the digital age because the two key participants in big data–internet giants and the government–have an interest in exploring the potential of data. However, the regulation of the use and application of user data is an obstacle to achieving their goals. Internet giants do not attach importance to providing transparent privacy policies and policy enforcement, while the government, as both an investor and consumer of big data services, has neither the interest nor the technical ability to regulate big data technology (Lv and Luo 2018).

In the construction of various intelligent brains and smart cities based on big data, there is a common blind spot among technicians, which is to oversimplify complex political and social structural problems and excessively worship the power of technology (Green and Franklin-Hodge 2019). This phenomenon is common not only in China but also in other countries. These corporate promoters of digital technology believe that the inefficiency of government services and the lack of public participation are due to insufficient information. In China, some scholars even propose that to comprehensively improve the country's governance capacity and perfect the governance system from the aspects of institution, culture, and technology, it is necessary to achieve the "unity of governance value, system, and technology" (阳 and 樊 2020). Scientific technology, which should have played a supporting role in political decision-making, has been elevated to the same level as values and institutional settings. Political issues, including values and institutional settings in respect of which a consensus should have been reached through meaningful and efficient discussions, have gradually become a technical job under the hype of technology governance-promoting companies and scholars.

Once it becomes a technical task, the primary concern when sharing collected information within the government is whether the information is sufficient, interconnected, and standardized. The classification of information levels, the division of responsibilities for management and supervision, and measures to prevent data collection beyond authorized permissions, prevent information leaks, and remedy any damage caused by information leaks, are no longer considered important issues concerning the government's accountability.

In 2022, a hacker claimed to sell a database from the Shanghai police that may contain information about approximately one billion Chinese citizens, making it perhaps one of the largest known personal data breaches in China (Liu and 孟建国 2022). Such a serious information leak should have been explained by Shanghai government, but China's official media, both at the central and local levels, did not report it. China has been strengthening the management of data breaches in the internet industry, but when government agencies leak huge amounts of information, they tend to be evasive[7]. Of course, sometimes they also make mistakes themselves.

Again in 2002, the collapse of Henan Rural Credit Cooperative caused depositors from all over the country to go to Luoyang, Henan to petition and plead for their rights. During the epidemic, cross-regional personnel movement requires the support of a green health code. To prevent non-local people from coming to Luoyang to petition, the Henan provincial government accurately assigned a red health code to every non-local person who might participate in the petition. During the epidemic, the red color meant positive and required home quarantine, making it impossible for people to move to Henan. It is perhaps understandable for those who have been to Henan, but it is frightening that some depositors who have never been to Henan were also inexplicably assigned a red health code. There is no doubt that this abuse of power and data was denounced by the people.

A China watcher wrote an opinion on The Initium Media:

"The use of health codes provides the government with a governance tool that covers the entire population. In the name of epidemic prevention and control, the red and yellow codes serve as electronic shackles that have absolute power and prohibit any action. Faced with such temptation, a government that heavily relies on surveillance governance cannot resist the urge to abuse this opportunity. It is natural for Henan to assign red codes to depositors from other regions, but the surging opposition caught them off guard. Now that every person's actions are constrained by health codes, this example poses a threat to everyone. In fact, even the central government may not be able to resist the temptation of

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[7] If providing sufficient information to the people is a condition for enhancing their political participation, then the government's attitude of pretending not to know is very unprofessional and will only increase the people's mistrust of the government.

health codes. However, the epidemic has not yet ended. If the credibility of health codes is weakened, it will bring pressure to epidemic prevention and control."(卷土 2022)

There is a classic expression in the logic of group petitioning in China, which is "small disturbance, small solution; big disturbance, big solution." To completely solve a problem, it is best to make a big fuss like Sun Wukong in *Journey to the West* and let everyone in the world know about your grievances. Preventing petitioners from causing a big scene and attracting the attention of the central government is the top priority for local governments. Although the number of petitioning incidents has decreased significantly in recent years, this logic has remained unchanged for decades and can explain the "red health code" incident in Henan Province.

The biggest concern is that the local government's means of prevention are very peculiar; they have used the private information of the people, entrusted to the government for the public interest of epidemic prevention and control, for all-round monitoring of the people. The local government cleverly used digital technology and personal information to immobilize the people who raised the issues, rather than solving the issues themselves（解决提出问题的人，而不是解决问题）. It may not matter much if Henan is just an isolated case; but if similar cases occur throughout the country, the foolishness of this approach in undermining the legitimacy of the regime is self-evident.

Conclusion

In the process of shaping e-government, we have observed the tremendous potential of digital technology. If used properly, it can effectively enhance the government's governance capacity. However, if used improperly, it is akin to using a sledgehammer to crack a nut; the goal will not be achieved, and only chicken feathers will be left on the ground, which will undermine the legitimacy of the power accumulated over the past few decades.

Digital government can improve the quality of life for the Chinese, which is a laudable objective beyond reproach. We have also observed that to achieve this goal, people are willing to provide their personal information. However, this does not mean that government officials who have access to the data can use it to monitor people at will. During the Mao Zedong era, there was a catchy slogan– "the masses' eyes are bright." At that time, the state called on the people to supervise their neighbors and grassroots officials' inaction. Throughout contemporary China's phenomenon of local governments misusing digital technology, this slogan seems to be valid still.

Due to space limitations, in this article, we provide only a brief introduction and commentary on China's e-government, and there are many issues that need to be discussed. In future research, we will turn our attention to the general public and observe how their views on big data have changed in the post-pandemic era.

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