

Governance by platforms: Configuration of the relationship between Party-government and society in China

Guolin Shen¹; Jintao Zhang²

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Abstract: Platforms have emerged as the dominant mode of communication in China, empowering individuals to express their opinions and question the authority and credibility of the ruling party. To illustrate the impact of platforms on Party-government relations and society in China, we analyze four representative Chinese platforms: the Sina Microblog matrix of @Yinchuan for Governing Online, Shenzhen Baoan Tong APP, Shanghai Baoshan Community Link platform, and the smart party building platform in Beihai City. Drawing on these case studies, we argue that platforms not only provide channels for party control and government transformation, but also contribute to social progress by shaping the relationship between the Party-government and society, thus reshaping Chinese governance.

Keywords: Chinese e-governance; government publicity; platform case studies; political communication; ruling party.

[es] Gobernanza de plataformas: Reconfigurando las dinámicas entre el Partido-gobierno y la sociedad en China

Resumen: Las plataformas se han convertido en el modo dominante de comunicación en China, otorgando a los individuos el poder de expresar sus opiniones y cuestionar la autoridad y credibilidad del partido en el poder. Para ilustrar el impacto de las plataformas en las relaciones entre el Partido y el gobierno, así como en la sociedad china, analizamos cuatro plataformas representativas: la matriz de microblogs de @Yinchuan para la gobernanza en línea, la aplicación Shenzhen Baoan Tong, la plataforma de enlace comunitario de Shanghai Baoshan y la plataforma de construcción inteligente del partido en la ciudad de Beihai. Basándonos en estos estudios de caso, sostenemos que las plataformas no solo proporcionan canales para la gestión del partido y la transformación del gobierno, sino que también contribuyen al progreso social al moldear la relación entre el Partido, el gobierno y la sociedad, reconfigurando así la gobernanza china.

Palabras clave: comunicación política; estudios de casos de plataformas; gobernanza digital china; partido en el poder; publicidad gubernamental.

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1. Introduction

The rise of the Internet has transformed interpersonal interactions, creating a ‘permanently online and connected’ lifestyle (Zhou, 2020). The platformization of the Internet has turned social media platforms like Google, Facebook, and WeChat into communication infrastructures. Scholars such as José van Dijck, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal (2018) refer to this phenomenon as the ‘platform society’, highlighting the heavy reliance on online platforms for social, economic, and personal communication. These

platforms are driven by business models and user agreements, built upon data and algorithms. Chinese society has embraced platformization (Keane, 2016; Jeroen et al., 2019), with over two and a half million Chinese apps from search engines and news outlets to social networking as of December 2021 (China Internet Network Information Center, 2021).

In this context, this paper aims to explore the relationship between society and government, and how this relationship impacts the effectiveness of governance. By examining four cases of e-governance, this study sheds light on the advantages and challenges

¹ Fudan University (China)
E-mail: shenguolin@fudan.edu.cn
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2629-118X>
² Fudan University (China)
E-mail: jtzhang22@m.fudan.edu.cn
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2909-4552>

presented by platforms, providing a new perspective on Chinese governance in the Internet age.

2. The impact of the platform society on Chinese governance

A platform is a digital infrastructure with various applications, from operating systems to games (Facebook, 2007). Platforms have rapidly grown and became integral to society. They can be categorized into three types: (i) operating systems like Windows, Mac OS, iOS, and Android; (ii) platforms such as Google, Facebook, Twitter, and WeChat; and (iii) industry-specific platforms like Meituan (for food delivery), Didi Taxi, and Airbnb. Platforms collect, circulate, and monetize user data through algorithms (Dijck, Poell and de Waal, 2018). Platforms serve not only as media for information dissemination and exchange, but also as connectors between production and consumption. They reshape social interactions and form public discourse and online communities.

Over the past two decades, platforms have been crucial tools for Chinese governance. They transform personal data into new information on digital platforms. Personal data has become the raw material for platforms, analogous to oil in the industrial age. The platform-driven society has redefined governance, facilitating communication and interaction among individuals, businesses, media outlets, governments, and other entities. Tech companies extract data from media outlets to integrate information production and distribution for online platforms. Moreover, traditional audiences have been transformed into users who directly acquire information on platforms. However, while users on platforms have more agency compared to traditional audiences, they also tend to be passive consumers who accept content filtered by algorithms.

Furthermore, platforms enhance public services by promoting collaboration in governance, integrating resources, and facilitating cross-departmental coordination. Yang Hongshan (2015) argues that, through market-oriented reforms, Chinese local governments have adopted integrated governance that brings together market and social agents through resource and project allocation. Platforms provide local governments with means to facilitate resource integration and departmental collaboration.

3. Case studies

This paper examines the influence of platforms on relationships between China's party, government, and society through four case studies. The method involves conducting in-depth research on representative cases to understand the phenomenon. We analyze four typical Chinese platforms: the Weibo microblog matrix of @Yinchuan for Governing

Online, Shenzhen Baoan Tong APP, Shanghai Baoshan Community Link platform, and the smart party building platform in Beihai City. These cases were chosen to represent different regions in China, including the Northwest, Southwest, East, and South, megacities, and different cities, such as ordinary cities, and minority autonomous regions. By analyzing these cases, we aim to provide an overview of Chinese governance through platforms, covering government response, public services, community governance, party building, and grassroots governance.

3.1. Coordination of responsive government: The microblog matrix of @Yinchuan for Governing Online

In recent years, there has been a surge in government accounts on social media. A total of two hundred and eighty-seven out of three hundred and thirty-three prefectural cities across the country have registered government accounts, covering 89.2% of cities. The Chinese counterpart of Twitter, Sina Weibo, was created in 2009 and has the largest user base. Yinchuan, the capital city of the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, has seen rapid growth in the number of government Microblog accounts, constituting an account system centered around @Yinchuan for Governing Online (figure 1). There are four hundred and fifty-nine government accounts for Yinchuan, with the number reaching five hundred and thirteen in its past. Netizens can post questions and receive answers via these government accounts.

Figure 1. Screenshot of @Yinchuan for Governing Online. Source: Sina Microblog <https://Microblog.com/wzyinchuan>



The system of the Yinchuan accounts matrix has a functional cycle that includes government response, collaboration, and supervision. The mechanism requires the government to respond to public concerns within a given time, not exceeding four hours on workdays and twenty-four hours on weekends. The account @Yinchuan for Governing Online takes it a

step further, committing to respond within one hour on workdays and eight hours on weekends.

Each department in Yinchuan government has at least one full-time staff member to manage the account. Account managers are authorized to investigate and coordinate their work, which is supported and underwritten by government at all levels. The microblog account runs 24/7. Each department must inform the Municipal Party Committee Inspection Office in advance if any staff responsible for managing the account is to be replaced. Microblog account managers receive monthly wages to ensure efficiency (Meng & Lu, 2016).

The collaborative mechanism involves multiple departments working together to address concerns reported via the account. As the core of the government account matrix, @Yinchuan for Governing Online vertically manages all related accounts of government departments and public services. In many cases, resolving a problem requires the participation of multiple departments. Lack of collaboration among accounts often leads to inadequate responses to public inquiries. The account matrix provides a solution by fostering collaboration among accounts. @Yinchuan for Governing Online acts as a coordinator, ensuring information is shared among different accounts and boosting the efficiency and effectiveness of government responses. The account matrix also collaborates with media and their Microblog accounts. @Yinchuan for Governing Online maintains working ties with Yinchuan Television Station, Ningxia Radio and Television Station, Ningxia Traffic Radio, and other media outlets. The media broadcasts public concerns on television and radio and passes them on to @Yinchuan for Governing Online for solutions. Once a problem is resolved, the media informs the public.

The supervision mechanism operates both internally and externally. Previously, internal supervision involved investigations, inspections, and holding individuals accountable through the Inspection Office. Government Microblog accounts were incorporated into routine and yearly assessments, with the results contributing to the city's overall assessment. Since 2019, internal supervision has been under the jurisdiction of the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), occurring twice a year. Accounts found to be negligent or fraudulent are negatively evaluated by the CAC, while those performing well are rewarded. External supervision refers to the oversight and constructive criticism from the media and the public, which is encouraged by the government. Internal and external supervision complement each other to ensure the efficiency and transparency of government responses. Moreover, the enhanced supervision mechanism prompts timely responses from government accounts.

This case study explores the mechanism of online government response in China. It contributes to responsiveness theory by examining Chinese

characteristics demonstrated by the government's response mechanism.

Responsiveness refers to the relationship between government policies and public opinion. A government is considered responsive if its policies are adjusted to align with public concerns. Robert A. Dahl (2008) argues that democracy features prompt governmental responses to public interests. Andrew Roberts and Byung-Yeon Kim (2011) point out that governmental responsiveness is a criterion for assessing whether a democracy functions well. In Western democracies, competitive elections make winning electoral votes crucial, prompting governments to respond to public concerns and demands. In China, government responsiveness embodies 'people's democracy': the government's response to people's demands shows that the state power comes from the people (Lin, 2012). Yu Keping (2005) emphasizes that the more responsive a government is, the better its governance will be. Grover Starling (1977) claims that responsiveness indicates governmental accountability by considering public demands to optimize policy and address problems.

Both Chinese and Western scholars recognize the significance of government responsiveness. Responsiveness reflects the extent of public participation in politics and interaction with the government. However, while studies often emphasize the importance of governmental responsiveness at a macro level, few have probed into the mechanism of the Chinese government's online engagement.

The Internet has transformed the bureaucratic and hierarchical systems, enabling citizens to pose questions. The Sina Microblog account serves as a medium for governmental responsiveness. Failing to respond in time may lead to public mistrust in the ruling party, government, and even the political system. Yinchuan is the first city to set up the government Microblog account matrix, which consists of over four hundred accounts operating by a collaborative mechanism. It would be difficult for the account @Yinchuan for Governing Online to achieve a broader social influence and enhance its response effectiveness without the account matrix.

3.2. A serving government on platform: The Shenzhen Baoan Tong App

In October 2015, the Baoan District of Shenzhen City released the Smart Baoan Building Plan (2015-2017) during the Smart Baoan building conference, aiming to become a leading force in China's smart city development by 2017. The district government launched the Baoan Tong App, which has four interfaces: the home page, enterprise interface, personal interface, and user's page (figure 2).

The enterprise interface has fifteen modules, including personal qualifications, investment, and construction management. The personal interface

comprises four modules, with education and housing services included. The user's page encompasses eight modules, such as account management, personal records for declarations, settings, and feedback. The Baoan Tong App was launched in January 2016, and since then it has brought innovation to governance and public services, promoting the government's efficiency and decision-making. The app, now updated to version 3.3.8, has expanded public services and optimized its service functions. Initially offering three interfaces, sixteen function modules, and sixty-seven function icons, the app had grown to five interfaces, twenty-seven function modules, two hundred and thirty-seven function icons, and three hundred and seventy-two public services by January 2019. Furthermore, the app's user data is shared and synchronized with the Guangdong provincial government service database, enabling broader public service delivery.

The Baoan Tong app could be understood in the following ways. It is an integral part of the district's Smart platform project, which is managed by a supervision panel. The panel has a general working plan that includes system establishment, model development, planning preparation, standardization, and platform building. Also, there are Building Plan (2015-2017) and the corresponding Three-Year Action Plan to guide the project's implementation.

Figure 2. Screenshot of Baoan Tong App. Source: Baoan Tong App http://ibaoan.sznews.com/content/2021-02/26/content_24000632.htm



Secondly, the app has optimized government administration and streamlined the registration process. The app has simplified documents required for registration and reduced the time required for nearly one hundred and fifty approval services. All registration and approval procedures can now be

completed online. Since the app was launched, a total of two hundred and thirty-eight administrative processes have been streamlined, which led to a reduction in thirteen physical service points and over two hundred staff positions, with overall efficiency increasing by 146%.

Thirdly, public services are consolidated into a single app, offering a one-stop service platform. The Baoan government required that all sectors provide their services through the app. Other online government platforms, such as apps, microblog accounts, and WeChat accounts, were suspended to ensure the app's centrality for public service delivery. With the coordination of twenty-six government departments, the app provides over three hundred and seventy services on a unified, efficient, and citizen-friendly government interface.

Fourthly, the app services and functions are constantly being optimized. The app adopts the O2O (online to offline) model commonly found in e-commerce platforms, resembling a government-led online shopping platform where the public select and 'purchase' services. The most frequently used services are displayed on the home page for easy access, with the app offering a one-stop service with high-quality products, similar to online shopping. Users can track the progress of registration through a timeline that indicates the completion process. If any issues arise, they can directly consult the online customer service. Furthermore, the app features a feedback reward mechanism, where the public are rewarded for providing genuine feedback through hotlines, online customer service, or message boards, fostering a positive relationship between the government and the public.

Shenzhen Baoan Tong is a typical government app developed by government and public service departments and is compatible with mobile devices. Over the past five years, China has witnessed the burgeoning of applications driven by 'Internet + government services'. According to the Mobile Government Services Report 2018 published by the Research Center for Digital Governance of Sun Yat-sen University, there are five hundred and thirty-four government apps in seventy large and medium-sized cities, with a 3.9% increase compared to 2017.

Government apps represent an innovative means for mediating governmental responsiveness. These apps integrate a wide range of services and leverage advanced technology, offering a seamless user experience by consolidating public services into one portable platform. Public services are accessible anytime and anywhere on government apps, such as checking government information and completing registrations (Xue & Xie, 2015). Government apps 9 (Wang, Yu and Ding, 2015). This approach centralizes services, enhances interaction with the public, facilitates notifications from the government, and builds an effective government image (Wang, 2017).

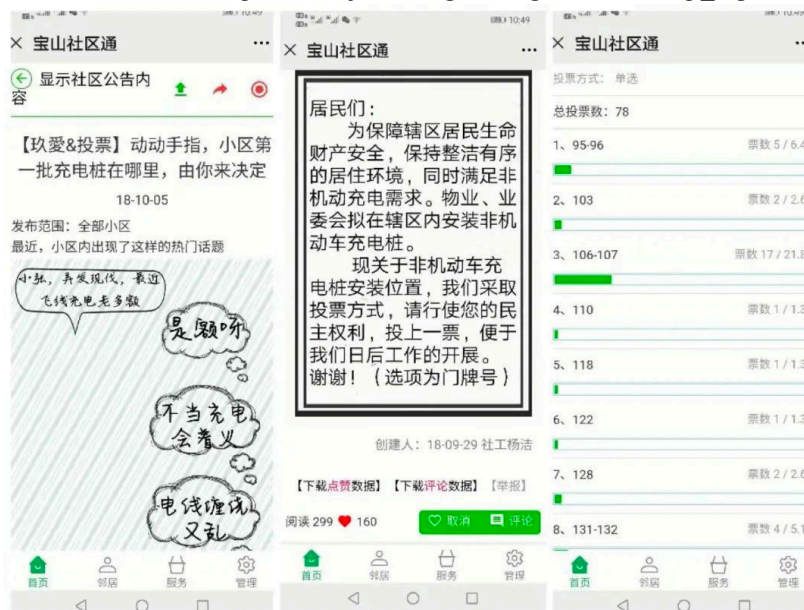
Technology serves as the foundation for government apps and other forms of e-governance. The operation of the Baoan Tong App relies on the Internet, information technology, and big data. The Baoan government selected a technical team through public bidding to provide technical support and system updates. Furthermore, decentralization and deepening governance reform have always been important aspects of China’s service-oriented government. In this case study, we are not merely investigating the transfer of public services to an app, rather, we are looking into how apps have allowed the careful reconfiguration of the public service system. Furthermore, while apps encourage the government to adapt to technology and enhance service quality, they not only provide government services, but also serves as a pathway for government-public interaction.

3.3. Community governance on the platform: The Shanghai Baoshan Community Link platform

Baoshan District is an industrially developed area of Shanghai, with a twenty-five-billion-dollar GDP and

a population of over two million residents. Led by the Party and the government, the Baoshan Community Link Platform was established in February 2017, and has been embraced by more than five hundred and seventy-five communities and villages in the district (figure 3). Over 500,000 families and more than 778,500 residents are registered on the platform. With its extensive user coverage, the platform has become one of the most influential grassroots online communities in China. It has received many awards and recognitions, such as the Best Example of Innovative Urban Grassroots Party Building, recognition as one of the twenty Representative Cases of National Rural Governance and one of the Top Ten Innovative Means for Community to Combat the Pandemic. Its success has led other parts of China to follow suit in implementing equivalent platforms, including Beijing, Tianjin, Shandong, Anhui, and Inner Mongolia. Moreover, it was adopted by the Shanghai Community Cloud as their Community Interaction Platform and has been widely promoted throughout Shanghai.

Figure 3. Screenshot of Baoshan Community Link Platform. Source: Baoshan Community Link Platform https://www.juweitong.cn/neighbour/home/qr_login



The Community Link Platform has introduced significant transformations in grassroots governance, party building, and public services in the district. It serves as a connection in several ways.

Firstly, it connects the party, government, and the public with the organizational capabilities of grassroots government, leveraging the Party’s grassroots organizational advantages as governance advantages. The managers ensure that the platform operates effectively while engaging residents in community affairs. In grassroots community governance, the Party allocates resources to support grassroots activities and discussions. Moreover,

leading Party members serve as exemplary figures in community public services.

Secondly, the platform utilizes technology to mine, analyze, and share user data. Automated data collection and analysis makes the ongoing detection of public concerns and urgent requests possible, thereby enabling the timely adjustment of public services and targeted assistance where necessary. Online community services are necessary as the Internet userbase rapidly grows. The platform enables users to engage online at any time and from anywhere. It has been integrated into Shanghai’s grid-governing system, which ensures that when issues fall outside

community management, relevant departments will be contacted for resolution.

This case demonstrates how the government of Baoshan district use e-platform to address community governance challenges, whose role was crucial in the country's urbanization. Changes in social structure and economic systems have reduced residents' willingness to participate in community governance (Zheng, 2009). Urban residents, particularly those without employment such as the elderly, rely heavily on communities for support (Liu, 2009). In contrast, workers primarily depend on workplaces rather than communities, resulting in a diminished interest and time for community affairs. The rise of online communities has also diverted residents' attention away from offline ones. The Community Link Platform provides precise public services and encourages online participation in community governance, an approach that boosts citizens' political participation and cultivates public trust through tangible and high-quality services.

Furthermore, it also shows that platform-based community governance relies on collaboration among the government, residents, community committees, and non-governmental organizations. These stakeholders work together to govern the community, meet public needs, and provide solutions for community demands. The government adopts a multi-agent governance model that integrates governance, service provision, and autonomous grassroots administration, rather than a centralized approach, with, online community governance appearing more dynamic than traditional forms.

3.4 Party building and grassroots governance: The smart party building platform of Beihai City

Beihai is a city of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. Thanks to the city's smart party building platform implemented in October 2016, it has stood out for excellence in party building and grassroots governance. It consists of several sub-platforms, including the Rural Network, the Sunshine Red Page, the Party Building Network, and the Beihai E-Eyes.

The Rural Network provides rural communities with access to government services by leveraging administrative resources at the municipal, county, township, and village levels. Citizens can fill out registration forms and requests through the platform, without needing to travel or undertake unnecessary assessment. By 2018, the Rural Network platform achieved full coverage of all four hundred and thirty villages in Beihai City. Over 1.3 million queries have

been successfully resolved via the platform, saving more than two hundred million yuan.

The Sunshine Red Page serves as a village-level platform for public services and operates on multiple outlets, including WeChat official accounts, apps, and websites. This platform offers sections such as My City, My Village, My Market, I Want to Know, and I Want to Say. It combines multiple functions, from policy notifications, power monitoring and rural e-commerce to education for party members. The Sunshine Red Page effectively disseminates grassroots party and government affairs, enhancing government-public communication. Additionally, the platform supports e-commerce by providing marketing and distribution channels for agricultural products.

The Party Building Network comprises three databases: a foundational database, a behavioral database, and an information database, along with six essential functions, including Publicity for Party Building, Party Affairs, Administration for Party Building Achievement, Electronic Record of Party Members, and Project Implementation. This platform enables the integration of party building efforts across different departments, facilitates data sharing, and optimizes party building activities. It also supports a flat organizational management which enhances the effectiveness of party member education and party activities.

The Beihai E-Eyes platform, established in December 2018, serves as a comprehensive administrative platform and a tool for government supervision. It provides a range of functions that promote transparency and accountability. One of the key features of the platform is a list of administrative penalties and requests, and public services provided at the municipal, county, and township levels. These lists are available on the platform's homepage. Beihai E-Eyes is responsible for managing the indicated issues, ensuring that they are appropriately addressed. The platform encourages public engagement by welcoming suggestions, feedback, and inquiries from the public. Once received, Beihai E-Eyes notifies relevant departments or law enforcement sectors, ensuring continuous accessibility and prompt response to public inquiries with 24-hour operation. It sets time limits for addressing inquiries and allows the public to track the progress of their requests, thus enabling public supervision of the government. The platform has handled over 97,000 complaints and concerns from the public within a six-month period, with a remarkable 100% completion rate and a 98% satisfaction rate among the public.

Figure 4. Screenshot of Beihai smart party building platform. Source: Beihai City Government https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/G4pdBd4zT-B7S40iWO5_DQ



Overall, the smart party building platform in Beihai City has played a crucial role in streamlining government services, promoting public engagement, and optimizing party building at the grassroots level (figure 4). It has a points system to manage registered organizations and members by recording their performance and status. An analysis of information and data makes deeper understanding of member characteristics and party organizations possible.

With the principle of serving the people at its core, the platform gains public support and strengthens the party's governance. The Rural Network Platform offers seventy-four services for rural residents, delivering greater efficiency, convenience, and timelier notification regarding beneficial policies. It enhances grassroots services of party organizations and serves as an online service hub. The Sunshine Red Page provides e-commerce channels for farmers and establishes better connections between the party, government, and the public.

By integrating resources and improving grassroots governance, the smart party building platform embodies the concept of integrated governance. The Beihai E-Eye serves as a crucial foundation for building a modern governance system with local characteristics. Grassroots party organizations integrate grid-governance established by higher-level departments into a comprehensive structure, coordinating party building, security maintenance, governance, emergency management, social assistance, etc.

Initially aimed at incorporating the concept of 'Internet+' into party building, the platform has exceeded expectations thanks to its extended functions. It serves not only as a platform for party members but also as a bridge connecting and serving the people. These efforts contribute to the improvement of both the party's internal governance and of society as a whole.

4. Discussion and conclusion

The rise of digital platforms in China presents both challenges and opportunities for governance. These platforms allow citizens to express their concerns and demands, promoting governmental transparency, accountability, and efficiency. The data collected on these platforms can be used to improve the quality and precision of public services, as well as to coordinate government departments, thereby facilitating governance by the Party.

In governing China, the Communist Party, branches of government, and society at large, play distinct roles. The Communist Party sets the agenda for the country's political system, governance and social development. It designs the country's political systems, guiding principles, and policies, while organizing and mobilizing the public through its political power, which can be traced back to the country's revolutionary period. The government at all levels is responsible for coordinating, implementing, and supervising policy-making processes. Since the reform and opening-up in 1978, society has become an agent in governance, acting as its foundation. Social organizations utilize social resources, such as providing social services needed by launching social donations, organizing voluntary services and absorbing government funds, while pushing the government to improve governance. Social organizations become the intermediary between the government and individuals. They avoid the expansion of social conflicts, resolve social grievances and deescalate social pressures by providing social services that meet the public's demands and reflect their interests. Social organizations also inform the government about people's demands to help resolve social problems and achieve social stability.

The characteristics of Chinese governance include Party dominance, government transformation, and growing social influence. This unique political make-up indicates that Chinese governance follows the principle of Party-government-society: The Party spearheads governance, the government serves as the executive branch, and society acts as the driving force.

In contrast to Western governance, which emphasizes pluralistic participation, Chinese governance emphasizes pluralistic participation under the leadership of the Party. The Communist Party of China plays a leading role in the country's socialist modernization, distinguishing China from the West. In China, it is believed that 'the political party creates the state, and the state creates society,' while in the West, it is 'society creates the state, and the state creates the political party.' The Chinese government has significantly transformed since 1978 with an aim to be a responsive and accountable government that better adapts to the growing market economy. Similarly, Chinese society also changed over the past forty-five years, with transformations

in social structure and significant growth in social organizations. However, civic power in China is not as prominent as that of the West. Social organizations in China operate under the leadership of the Party and the supervision of the government.

This article focuses on the impact of online platforms on Chinese governance that has enhanced individuals' communication abilities, reshaped social interactions, and influenced public life. By analyzing four cases, this article concludes that platforms empower individuals to express and challenge the authority of the ruling party and government, raising the standards of government responsiveness. Platforms made e-governance possible, such as government apps that improve the quality of government services and enhance interaction with the public. Platforms strengthen grassroots governance, increase political participation, and promote cooperation between different agencies, including party, government, and

society. Additionally, they play an important role in improving the party's administration, extend party platforms to society, and serve as a bridge between the party-government and the public.

To sum up, digital platforms provide additional infrastructure for governance and serve as a channel for Party dominance, government transformation, and the growing influence of society, with the modernization of Chinese governance entailing the effective use of platforms.

5. Authorship contribution statement

Shen Guolin: Conceptualization, Methodology, Case studies, Writing – Draft, Review & Editing, Supervision.

Zhang Jintao: Case studies, Writing – Draft, Review & Editing.

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