


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Mechanical Responsiveness: China's Online Petition System

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Abstract

Using quantitative analysis and qualitative in-depth interviews conducted in China in 2022–2024, this study explores a new form of grievance expression and dispute resolution adopted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP): the online petition. While digital technology can receive and handle public complaints more efficiently, local officials under intense top-down pressure and increased accountability often only address citizens' demands performatively to satisfy the political needs of their superiors. The study of “mechanical responsiveness” reveals that the CCP's reinforced scrutiny of petitioners as well as local officials not only fails to prevent and resolve disputes at the source but also may lead to increased social discontent and pent-up resentments in the long run when the government fails to live up to its promises. Citizens will also lose faith in the institution and become politically disengaged if grassroots officials are always trying to curry favour with their superiors and avoid punishment rather than address public demands.

摘要

本研究通过在 2022 至 2024 年期间在中国开展的一系列定量分析与定性深度访谈, 探讨中国用于诉求表达与解决争端的一种新型模式——网上信访系统。尽管数字技术可以大大促进地方政府更高效地接收和处理公众的信访诉求, 但面对艰巨的工作任务和严厉的问责机制, 地方官员往往选择以应付方式来回应公民的诉求, 其目的是为了更好地完成上级领导交代的政治任务和要求。本文通过对“机械性回应”的研究发现, 中国政府对访民和地方官员越来越紧的管控不仅未能从源头上预防和解决矛盾纠纷, 反而可能在政府无法兑现承诺时导致更大程度的社会不满。而且如果基层官员更关注上级领导的旨意, 在处理民众投诉时尽可能避免被问责而不是满足百姓的实际需求, 也会导致民众对政府的信任度下降, 使网上信访机制丧失其原有效用。

Keywords: digital technology; mechanical responsiveness; online petition; social conflict; stability maintenance

关键词: 数字技术; 机械性回应; 网上信访; 社会冲突; 维护稳定

It has been widely argued that digital technologies are strategically deployed by authoritarian states, such as China, Cambodia, India and countries in the Middle East and North Africa,¹ to achieve comprehensive “dataveillance” of society.² This raises the important yet unanswered question of whether, when compared with the common civilian (*laobaixing* 老百姓), grassroots officials in the People's Republic of China (PRC) are more tightly monitored and more strictly disciplined under

1 MacKinnon 2011; Jack et al. 2021.

2 Marvin et al. 2022.

digital authoritarianism³ or the so-called “networked authoritarianism,”⁴ given the broad “digital governance” of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).⁵ A typical yet understudied case is the online petition.

Although *xinfang* 信访 (petitioning)⁶ is an important alternative to the formal legal channels through which Chinese citizens can seek to resolve their disputes,⁷ the petition office is a form of weak bureaucracy – a so-called “coordination department” – with no substantive power to make political decisions. Yet, the online petition system is “only a platform for receiving public complaints but is believed to be omnipotent by the common people.”⁸ In addition to managing the grievances of the masses, the petition system helps to ensure the regime’s survival by reducing the information deficiencies confronting the Chinese party-state.⁹ It is, therefore, an important mechanism by which the CCP can conduct top-down performance reviews and examinations to supervise and manage local political elites. Prior research has discussed the practices and outcomes of China’s petition system,¹⁰ with a particular focus on the interactions between petitioners and their local states.¹¹ Very few studies have focused on the local officials responsible for managing petition issues and how they respond to public complaints and attempt to settle disputes and maintain stability through online petitions.

The term “online petitions” (*wangshang xinfang* 网上信访) refers to proposals, opinions, requests or complaints made to authorities and agencies by citizens, legal persons or other organizations via digital platforms, including by posting messages on the petitioning websites of local Party committees or governments and expressing grievances through email and mobile phone applications. So, what are the technological features of online petitions? In this paper, we seek to understand if online petitions are better than traditional petitions at addressing petitioners’ grievances and resolving social disputes. By uncovering the effects of online petitions on dispute resolution and social stability maintenance in China, we can gain a better understanding of how digital governance reshapes the internal dynamics and top-down pressures of local officials in the petition system. Drawing from quantitative statistical analysis and qualitative in-depth interviews conducted in China, our findings suggest that while the strong digital oversight that accompanies online petitions does accelerate the processing of public complaints and claims, local officials demonstrate a “mechanical responsiveness” in the face of increased top-down political pressure. They are primarily concerned with meeting their superiors’ expectations when responding to public demands instead of really trying to resolve social disputes and serve the people.

We argue that the theorization of “performative governance” is meaningful but inadequate,¹² as it reflects an oversimplification of the power relationship between ruling elites and subordinate groups and overlooks the specific strategies used by local officials when interacting with the central government and local citizens. In contrast, “mechanical responsiveness” refers to the operational tactics used by a local state to create an impression of effectively preventing collective activism, managing petition issues and achieving good governance based on digital technologies to satisfy the upper levels rather than the citizens. If the very purpose of performative governance is to foster an image of good governance among local citizens, the key aim of mechanical responsiveness is to foster an image of local officials’ loyalty and obedience to higher-level authorities. In contrast to Iza Ding’s emphasis on “the theatrical deployment of language, symbols, and gestures to foster an impression

3 Tiberiu and Lupu 2021; Sherman 2021.

4 Maréchal 2017; Moss 2018.

5 Hu and Zhang 2024; Erete and Burrell 2017.

6 In this study, we use the terms “petition,” “*xinfang*” and “letters and visits” interchangeably.

7 Minzner 2006.

8 Interview with Mr Xu, a local official of the petition bureau, F District, T City, 2 December 2023.

9 Chen, Jing 2016.

10 Peerenboom 2001; Li, Liu and O’Brien 2012.

11 Chen, Xi 2009; Zeng and Feng 2022; He and Feng 2016.

12 Ding 2020.

of good governance among citizens,” mechanical responsiveness stresses the concrete deliverables rather than the theatrical gestures performed by local officials.¹³ Grassroots cadres, pressured by the strong surveillance and harsh discipline that characterize Xi Jinping’s 习近平 rule, spend considerable effort avoiding punishment and prioritizing satisfying their superiors. The study of mechanical responsiveness suggests that although the CCP seeks to foster a “perfect digital dictatorship” in which security is prioritized over liberty,¹⁴ it not only fails to resolve disputes under its “source governance of social disputes,”¹⁵ but may also contribute to increased social discontent and pent-up resentments in the long run when the government fails to live up to its promises.¹⁶ Citizens will also lose faith in the institution and become politically disengaged if grassroots officials are always trying to curry favour with their superiors and dodge punishment rather than meet public demands.¹⁷

Governance Response and Mechanical Responsiveness under Authoritarianism

It has been argued that under authoritarianism, the party-state must rely on top-down accountability to make officials responsive to public demands while being accountable to their superiors.¹⁸ In China, local officials are assigned chief responsibility for dealing with many cases of resistance and maintaining social stability.¹⁹ Coercive and repressive means, such as informal coercion,²⁰ relational repression,²¹ employing thugs-for-hire²² and policing and crackdowns,²³ are often used by local cadres to defuse social protests and maintain political stability. However, grassroots cadres’ willingness to make concessions largely depends on the risks they face when dealing with widespread public resistance. Effectively defusing social grievances and resolving disputes that may lead to resistance carry great political weight, and failing to do so could have severe consequences for their career owing to the “one-vote veto” system” (*yipiao foujue* 一票否决).²⁴ This is why local governments often “proactively monitor citizen opposition to state policies”²⁵ and “selectively comply with superiors’ directives and citizens’ opinions.”²⁶

With the advent of the internet and the wide application of new information technologies, citizens have more diverse channels through which to express their complaints and recommendations to the government.²⁷ Government responsiveness to citizens’ demands has also increased owing to a combination of digital development and incentives as well as oversight at all levels of government.²⁸ Yet since Xi Jinping took office in 2012, political power has been recentralized,²⁹ ideological discipline has increased,³⁰ state repression has changed from fragmentation to consolidation,³¹ and political control and mass surveillance have been further enhanced,³² leaving less room for contentious participation despite the preservation of the various official channels for public complaint. Although

13 Ibid.

14 Cabestan 2024.

15 Hu and Wu 2023b.

16 Cai and Zhou 2019.

17 Distelhorst and Hou 2017.

18 Chen, Pan and Xu 2016.

19 Edin 2003; Cai 2008.

20 Chen 2017.

21 Deng and O’Brien 2013.

22 Ong 2018.

23 Zhou and Yan 2014.

24 Heimer 2006.

25 Heurlin 2016, 3.

26 Meng and Su 2021.

27 Su and Meng 2016.

28 Schlæger and Stepan 2017; Cai and Zhou 2019.

29 Qiaoan and Teets 2020.

30 Minzner 2018.

31 Fu and Distelhorst 2018.

32 Hu and Zhang 2024; Shevtsova 2015.

the punishment of local officials can be selective and differentiated,³³ and lower-level government officials may hide information on wrongdoings through patronage ties,³⁴ scrutiny is continuously increasing as the growing power of digital technology and social media enhance the ability to monitor public servants and expand the means available for citizen expression.³⁵ This enables “responsive authoritarianism,” under which the state allows for a limited degree of public participation and tries to be responsive to appeals from nonstate actors to improve governance, to become more restrictive in China.³⁶ In particular, since the launch of the anti-corruption campaign, local officials’ discretion to respond to the information they collect through petitions and other institutional channels has been reduced and even inhibited.³⁷ This has led them to be more passive than responsive, as grass-roots cadres are “too frightened to do anything without explicit orders from the top.”³⁸ Indeed, a government with excessive top-down accountability pressure tends to discourage bureaucrats from taking action, because local officials become more vulnerable to disciplinary penalties and tend to be more performative.³⁹

With “performative governance,” the state relies on the theatrical deployment of visual, verbal and gestural symbols, without substantive resolution of public demands, to foster an impression of good governance before an audience of citizens. Yet under digital authoritarianism, authoritarian governments are made more alert to the social risks that accompany online citizen participation and complaints,⁴⁰ prompting them to use “cosmetic responsiveness” regarding mundane complaints that are not particularly threatening.⁴¹ The concept of mechanical responsiveness, as used in this article, describes the specific strategy that Chinese local officials adopt to curry favour with their superiors and dodge punishment in a system characterized by strong accountability but limited incentives under digital authoritarianism. This concept is particularly relevant in the handling of petition cases relating to administrative disputes with local governments. While this approach is partly rooted in the dynamics of authoritarian responsiveness, given that local officials derive their power from their superiors, mechanical responsiveness, in contrast to cosmetic responsiveness, illustrates how digital governance reshapes the emotional dynamics and internal pressures of the petition system in three key aspects.

First, digital technologies not only facilitate the administrative efficiency of receiving and processing public complaints but also enhance the supervision and accountability of grassroots officials. Second, stricter discipline and appraisal metrics mean that grassroots cadres focus more on meeting their superiors’ expectations and requirements than on satisfying public demands. Third, the CCP seeks to use the online petition system to deter grassroots officials from engaging in misconduct and to ensure that they remain responsive to the public; however, the actual outcomes may run counter to the original intention. In particular, although some new practices have been introduced under Xi’s leadership, such as “whole-process people’s democracy,”⁴² the overall responsiveness of Chinese local states through official channels requires further evaluation to determine whether these changes encourage rule-based local responsiveness or else simply trap local bureaucrats in a Weberian iron cage.⁴³ The online petition system presents a typical case demonstrating how mechanical responsiveness works at the grassroots level.

33 Cai and Zhu 2013.

34 Pan and Chen 2018.

35 Pei 2024; Dimitrov 2015; Qin, Stromberg and Wu 2017.

36 Heurlin 2016; Qiaoan and Teets 2020.

37 Fewsmith and Nathan 2019.

38 Tepperman 2018.

39 Zhong and Zeng 2024.

40 Chen, Jidong, Pan and Xu 2016; Yang 2009.

41 Wang and Han 2023.

42 Hu and Wu 2023a.

43 Scaff 1987.

Methods

The data for this study were obtained through extensive fieldwork conducted during 2020 and 2024. We began collecting data in 2020 because that is the year the Chinese government fully implemented the online petition system. We gathered our evidence from a variety of sources. First, we conducted a statistical analysis of 861 online petition posts, including online complaints (demonstrating public anger and grievances), from the government complaints portal for F District of T City, China. The “delivery-style petition” (*waimaishi xinfang* 外卖式信访), which has been used by the local district petition office since 2019, also served as a rich source of information. This channel allows citizens to voice complaints and make suggestions to the government via a special app. In addition, we conducted in-depth interviews with 28 local officials working in petition offices, 22 petitioners who had submitted online petitions, eight judicial staff members at the local courts or judicial bureaus, and six professors and experts who specialize in petition and dispute resolution in China. We were also able to access internal documents containing information on online petitions. These files are not available to the public and detail high-level government leaders’ instructions on handling complaints and on how local governments should apply digital technologies to manage petition cases. They also include criteria for evaluating the performance of the local officials responsible for dealing with complaints from the public. The information gathered from these files is much more reliable than that derived from media reports on China’s petitions and is very valuable in helping researchers understand the true state of affairs. Finally, we obtained online information from government websites, electronic newspapers such as the *Paper* (*Pengpai xinwen* 澎湃新闻) and WeChat 微信 pertaining to citizens’ grievances and the government’s responses to their complaints.

F District was chosen because it is located in T City, one of the largest metropolises in China. It has three streets (*jiedao* 街道) and eight towns (*zhen* 镇), with a total population of about 1.12 million people. The district is rife with social conflicts, particularly disputes relating to urban construction and property management. As early as 2019, the petition office of F District began to apply digital means to collect and manage local citizens’ complaints and disputes. Its implementation of a delivery-style petition system for receiving, handling and settling social disputes has become a model for other areas in T City and across China. Its unique features and wealth of data make it a valuable resource for the study of online petitions.

We collected typical cases of online petitions published by the local government from 1 January 2020 to 31 July 2024. In addition to analysing local officials’ responses to public appeals, we also examine the internal dynamics between China’s grassroots cadres and their superiors in dealing with petition issues, particularly as facilitated by digital technologies. Therefore, this study pays special attention to the kinds of requests local officials respond to as well as the content of their responses to public complaints.

The Mechanism and Application of Online Petitions

In 2014, the central government formally requested the establishment and implementation of an online system to receive, handle and publish public complaints and petition issues via the internet. The aim was to improve transparency and strengthen public supervision throughout the petition management process. On 30 April 2022, the National Bureau of Letter and Visits (NBLV) issued the “Work regulations on the online handling of letters and visits” (effective on 1 May 2022), which set out the range of petitions that can be submitted and processed online, the content of the petitions and how officials should respond.⁴⁴ Since then, local petition offices across the country have begun to launch and implement online petition systems.

44 “Xinfang shixiang wangshan banli gongzuo guicheng” (Working procedures for the online handling of petition matters). Guojia xinfang ju, 20 June 2022, https://www.gjxfj.gov.cn/2022-06/20/c_1310627727.htm. Accessed 3 May 2024.

T City was one of the first places in China to launch an online petition system. As early as 2016, it established an online petition platform, providing the public with more convenient ways to share opinions and offer recommendations, make appeals and supervise the work of the Party and government. In general, compared with traditional routes, online petitions require the government to respond to and resolve citizens' complaints and requests more quickly and effectively. When raising a grievance online, citizens can choose one of three options: (1) government website, (2) mobile phone app or (3) the Letters and Visits official account on WeChat. Regardless of which route is chosen, CCP cadres at the grassroots level are appraised according to several key performance indicators: the prompt handling of the petition issues, the contact rate of the initial petition, the efficiency of handling public demands, the repetition rate of initial petitions, the year-on-year variation in repeated petition cases, the online petition response rate and the public satisfaction rate. Departments and officials who do not handle petition issues promptly, or who fail to manage cases properly so as to cause major collective incidents (*quntixing shijian* 群体性事件), adverse social effects or serious consequences, shall be assessed as unqualified. Their corresponding leaders and those specifically responsible shall be held accountable in accordance with the relevant provisions.⁴⁵

Online complaints and government responses

The sample data used to analyse public online petition cases were obtained from the digital platform of the Online Petition/Public Suggestion Soliciting and Accepting Centre, established by the F District government in T City.⁴⁶ This platform brings together various entities, including the Party committee, government offices, petition offices, education bureau, construction and management committee, health commission, market supervision bureau, water bureau and street offices, to jointly manage and resolve the complaints and demands submitted online by citizens. After registering on the government website, citizens must choose a specific category of complaint, clearly state the details of their issue, specify their demands and provide evidence supporting their complaint. Using a real name improves the likelihood of complaints being accepted and resolved. Citizens can easily track the progress and results of every step of a petition case online. Figure 1 illustrates the step-by-step process for online complaints on the government website.

Compared with traditional means, petitioning online is not only more convenient but can also be a more open and transparent way of dealing with complaints. It should be noted, however, that not all petitions and requests submitted online can be processed and resolved. As the petition office lacks substantive decision-making power, whether the complaints will be processed depends largely on the attitude of the corresponding functional departments,⁴⁷ particularly the local leaders' policy preferences.⁴⁸ We found that government agencies respond to the public's demands in one of three ways: they respond to posts and directly address the problem (Category A); they respond to posts and process the claims, but the claims may not be eventually addressed (Category B); or they respond to posts without processing or addressing them (Category C).⁴⁹ Category A and B responses involve substantive actions by functional departments; Category C responses do not. Based on 861 cases of various types of online petitions collected from F District's online platform from 2022 to 2024, Table 1 presents statistics for all three categories of responsiveness and the public's satisfaction rate with the management and outcome of online petition cases.⁵⁰

45 Information collected during fieldwork in T City, 10 June 2023.

46 There is an online petition platform in each district in T City, called the "Online petition/public suggestion soliciting and accepting centre," where public complaints have been published since 7 September 2016.

47 Wang and Han 2023.

48 Cai and Zhou 2019; Meng and Su 2021.

49 According to information obtained during fieldwork, some cases are not resolved or processed because the corresponding issues lack any legal or policy basis. As such, they cannot be addressed by the corresponding department.

50 Any citizen can rate the handling and outcome of an online petition case on a scale of 0–100, with a positive rating being the sum of everyone's scores divided by the number of participants in the scoring process for each case.

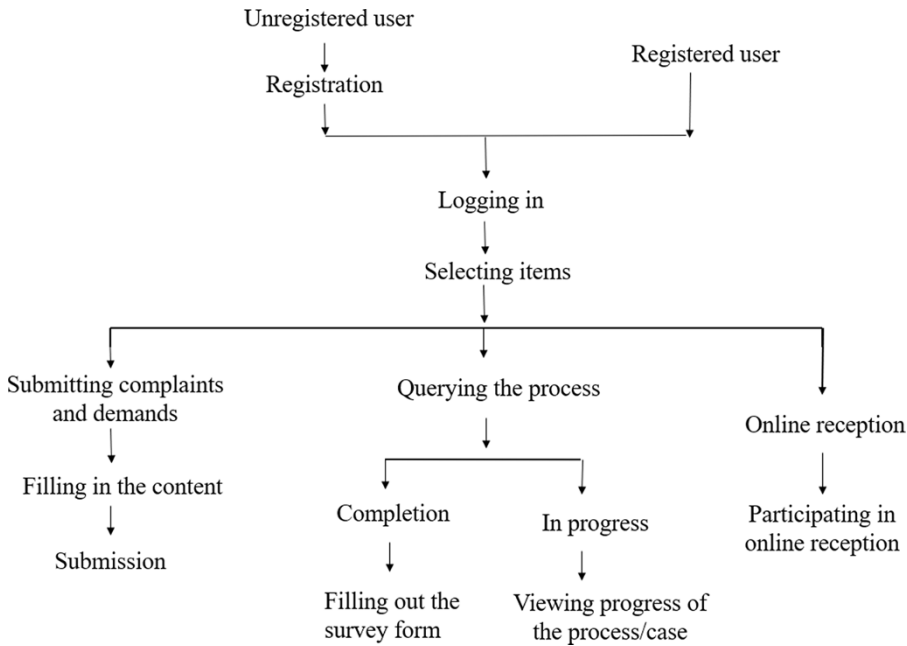


Figure 1. The Online Citizen Complaint Process

Source: Designed by authors.

Table 1. Number, Percentage and Evaluation Rate of Online Petition Responses

Responsiveness Type	Number of Cases	Percentage (%)	Number of Cases with Public Evaluation	Public Satisfaction Rate (%)
Category A	269	31.2	95	92.1
Category B	325	37.8	166	62.3
Category C	267	31.0	148	31.3
Total	861	100	409	

Source: Compiled by authors.

Obviously, the more effective the government is in dealing with the problem, the more satisfied the public will be. To examine how the local authorities handled the various types of complaints, we further analysed the number and share of complaints of each type, the percentage of government responses (categories A–C), and the corresponding public satisfaction rate (Table 2). Table 2 shows that consultation issues constituted 86.2 per cent of Category A responses and achieved the highest satisfaction rate (77.1 per cent) of all resolved online petition case types. Here, consultation refers to inquiries made by the public regarding matters and processes related to policies, laws and regulations that are not clear or understood. For instance, one petitioner asked, “How can I apply for newborn health insurance?” After the case was assigned through the online petition platform, officials from the medical insurance bureau of F District provided a detailed reply outlining the procedures for applying for newborn health insurance, thereby fully addressing the petitioner’s request.⁵¹

In addition to consultation cases, some issues relating to the environment or transportation were also quickly addressed. For example, a petitioner reported that the rubbish in a riverbank area was seriously affecting the residential environment. In response, officials from the water resources bureau of F District in T City conducted an immediate on-site inspection and arranged for clearance of

51 Information retrieved from the online petition posts of the government website of F District.

Table 2. Number, Percentage and Evaluation Rate of Different Types of Complaints

Type of Case	Number of Cases	Percentage (%)	Responsiveness Type (%)			Public Satisfaction Rate (%)
			Category A	Category B	Category C	
Infrastructure	111	12.9	29.7	35.1	35.1	56.7
Environment	256	29.7	32.4	46.0	21.4	60.9
Consultation	116	13.5	86.2	8.8	5.1	77.1
Transportation	116	13.5	10.3	39.6	50.0	50.4
Rights and interests	169	19.6	17.1	41.4	41.4	51.4
Education	49	5.7	18.3	40.8	40.8	53.1
Others (mainly policy suggestions)	44	5.1	6.8	50.0	43.1	51.2
Total	861	100				

Source: Compiled by the authors.

the waste. Subsequently, the petition office informed the petitioner that the issue had been resolved within seven days. Similarly, other environmental issues, such as the removal of foreign objects, weeds and harmful species (for example, apple snails) from rivers, were actually all addressed by the same bureau and received Category A responses. However, although environmental disputes accounted for the highest proportion of all types of cases, only 32.4 per cent of these complaints were resolved. While the annual completion rate was high (91 per cent), the percentage of complaints that were fully resolved was not. Many demands had been responded to by the government but remained unprocessed or unaddressed. Mr Zhang, a local official in the district petition office, explained:

Completion rate is not the same as resolution rate – completion usually means that we follow procedures to inform the petitioners of the outcome of their complaints, whereas resolution rate means that the petitioners’ demands are met. If their petitions have a clear legal and policy basis, then we will definitely resolve them and reply to the petitioners as soon as possible. If we exceed the time limit, we will be held accountable. But some demands have no legal or policy basis, or if we do not have extra funds at the time, we cannot solve them. However, we will definitely reply to them, even if we cannot solve [their issues]. In this situation, we can only do it perfunctorily.⁵²

Therefore, a high percentage of Category A responses reflects the relatively low complexity of the demands raised by the petitioners; the relevant departments can resolve such demands quickly and efficiently. The local government’s Category C responses to online posts tended to be very perfunctory and performative, and sometimes even completely unrelated, as officials simply tried to “absorb petitioners’ complaints” and complete responses without actually addressing the issue.⁵³ For example, among the petitions related to transport and education issues, there were requests by citizens to have more subway stations and bus stops constructed near their homes, and complaints by parents about having to disclose personal information when using various apps for school competitions and activities. The government’s response to all of these complaints was: “We have received the information in your petition. We will take it as a reference for our work.” Another Category C response was to a case related to environmental issues. Citizens had called for the dismantling of chemical plants that emitted toxic gases which affected the health of the surrounding residents, especially the elderly. In a response that was completely unrelated to the people’s demands, the government replied: “The

52 Interview with Mr Zhang, a local official in the district petition office, F District, T City, 7 June 2023.

53 Hou 2020, 651.

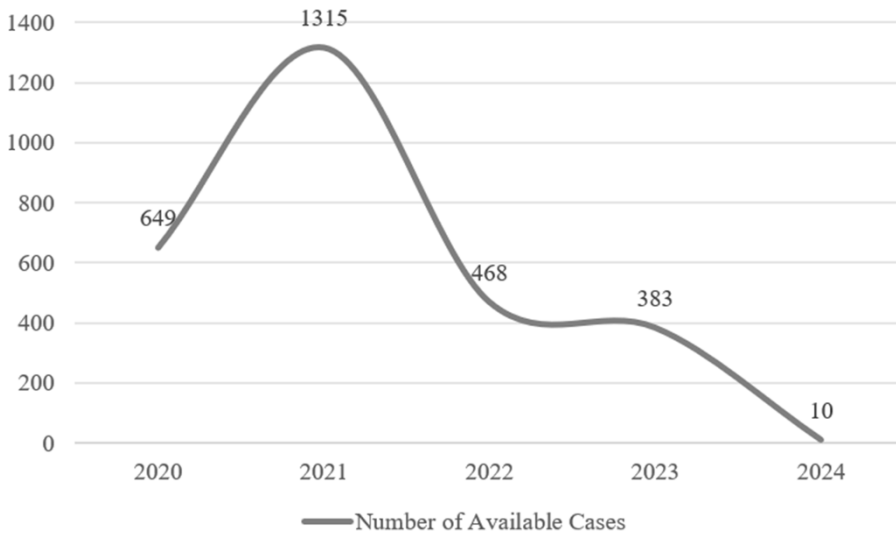


Figure 2. Total Number of Online Petition Cases in F District, 2020–2024

Source: Data collected during fieldwork.

peasant housing project in L Town is temporarily suspended. Villagers are encouraged to improve their living conditions through renovation. Thank you for your concern, understanding and support for the work of the Party and government.”

The case of Mr Ruan illustrates a Category B response. Mr Ruan complained that his house had suffered cracked walls, ceilings and roofing, as well as damage from a water leak, because of the relocation of a nearby factory building. The petition office did take substantive actions by conducting an on-site inspection; however, it deemed his complaint to be inadmissible and, in its online reply, suggested that the issue be resolved through litigation in accordance with the law. Disputes involving local governments and those related to relocation are complex. Courts may not accept and file such cases, and even if they do, it is difficult to win administrative litigation. Both Category B and C responses demonstrate that the local government can respond to public demands without actually addressing them. Mr Zhao explained:

We have to meet the requirement set by the State Petition Bureau to publish no less than 30 per cent of the annual petition cases online. However, we must take into consideration whether the cases put online would trigger public dissatisfaction and even escalate conflicts since other petitioners may cause trouble. The content of the petitioners’ complaints is uploaded to the website after scanning their complaint letters directly. We are unable to make any changes. But, since January 2024, there has been a significant drop in the number of online petition posts, and as from this year, posting online petitions will no longer be a condition for review.⁵⁴

Figure 2 shows the total number of online petition cases published on the district government website from 2020 to 2024. It is noteworthy that although the content and public ratings of online petitions are authentic, not all online petition cases are published on the government website; only those that are not sensitive, personal or closely related to collective action are selected for public release. Cases relating to relocation conflicts or housing disputes arising from the unfinished construction of residential areas are hardly ever found online. Overall, this demonstrates that the responsiveness of grassroots governments to online petitions is more to do with completing assessment tasks rather than truly addressing the public’s demands.

54 Interview with Mr Zhao, an NBLV cadre, 4 June 2024.

Complaining through mobile apps: the delivery-style petition

In May 2019, inspired by the food-delivery service model, the F District petition office first proposed the idea of providing a delivery-style petition service, and in 2022, it officially launched a digital platform called “E-meeting and replying.” The delivery-style service is a new petition service model that uses a digital platform to offer a “takeaway petition,” with the district petition office serving as the intermediary, all functional departments and villages (communities) serving as the merchants, and Party members, local cadres and grassroots staff members in the petition office serving as delivery personnel. To use the delivery-style petition system, local residents must first scan the QR code of the digital petition platform and then convey their grievance and demands via text-, voice- or image-based inputs. The system then classifies the dispute and automatically forwards it to the institutions responsible for handling that category of dispute.⁵⁵ The local officials of the F District petition office then analyse the cases upon receipt and forward them to the corresponding functional departments, local villages (communities) and leaders responsible for managing the issues pertained to in the petition. The F District petition office reviews the demands to ensure that they are legal and reasonable. It then communicates the results of the process online or offline, depending on the specific circumstances of the case. After their petition cases are addressed, citizens can evaluate the local officials who processed their grievance on the digital “E-meeting and replying” platform. This public evaluation is a key performance indicator in the local petition officials’ annual appraisals. The complete delivery-style process therefore involves members of the public scanning QR codes to “place orders” (i.e. make complaints or open petition cases), local officials receiving and dispatching these “orders,” local officials delivering petition results, and then finally, the public evaluating those involved in the process and its outcomes.

One of the towns in F District has 34 petition agency service stations that cater for the entire town. People who may not know how to scan a QR code to place an order or those with mobility issues can also call various village (residential) petition agency service stations in their community or village and have the petition agents place the order on their behalf. In contrast to the traditional petition models, this delivery-style petition model offers residents the opportunity to air their grievances and convey their opinions anytime and anywhere. The delivery-style model also makes receiving information and processing public demands much more convenient for government departments. Yet, its implementation has also presented an enormous challenge for local officials. Mr Zhao, one of the F District petition officers, explained:

Since 2019, the proportion of online petition cases has continued to increase. When the trial of delivery-style petitions started in 2019, the proportion of online petition cases was about 32.4 per cent of the total number of petitions. However, by 2023, it accounted for almost 70 per cent. That is to say, more than half of the petition issues are filed online, which undoubtedly poses a great challenge to our work. On the one hand, those who fail to perform well will be held accountable! On the other hand, we don’t have the power to force other departments to comply and can only ask them to cooperate in resolving disputes.⁵⁶

55 The system divides disputes into three categories. The first, general conflicts, mainly includes neighbourhood disputes and noise disturbances. These types of conflicts are usually handled by grassroots forces, such as village legal advisors and volunteers for dispute management, who use their social and geographical advantages to resolve such conflicts promptly. The second category, moderate conflicts, includes disputes related to fighting, delinquency, injury and property damage. These conflicts must be mediated and resolved via the collaborative network (i.e. the “three offices one court” mechanism, which is addressed later) before they reach litigation. The third type, severe conflicts, mainly involves collective, emergent, intractable disputes that may have a significant impact on the interests of the people. Severe conflicts are also resolved through the collaborative network. By informing the parties of their legal provisions and providing them with suggestions, they are guided to make legal and reasonable decisions; once a mediation agreement has been formed, it is confirmed by the judiciary to ensure the effective resolution of the dispute. Information obtained from field notes.

56 Interview with Mr Zhao, a 48-year-old local official from the F District petition office, T City, 20 July 2023.

Local officials face increased pressure when handling and resolving petition cases filed via the delivery-style model. Particularly, the district government established an assessment criterion for delivery-style petitions, which allocates responsibility to a set of frontline bureaucrats. These individuals must undergo quarterly assessments, the results of which are then reported to their leaders and circulated within the government. Depending on the severity of any problem, the Joint Conference of Letters and Visits (*Xinfang lianxi huiyi* 信访联席会议) will internally investigate and circulate information on the misconduct of Party members, cadres and grassroots officials who fail to perform their duties adequately or who demonstrate serious problems in managing petition cases (by, for example, slacking off, shifting responsibility or intensifying conflicts). These individuals will then be supervised and ordered to rectify the situation.⁵⁷ If such rectification is not completed on schedule, further punishment will be imposed. Although the delivery-style petition model has been highly valued and praised by upper-level leaders, there remain many complex social problems that it cannot completely solve. Another local official from the petition office complained:

The seven-day completion requirement in the regulations of the delivery-style petition indicates that we must reply to petitioners on how to resolve their issues within seven days. The delivery-style petition undoubtedly improves the convenience and efficiency of receiving information from people at our end. However, issues such as elevator installation and demolition disputes in old residential areas are very complicated, and solving these problems still requires extensive coordination with many other departments and mediation with the petitioners, which definitely takes more than seven days. Even artificial intelligence cannot solve them!⁵⁸

The regulations stipulate that if local officials do not respond to petitioners' requests and complaints within seven days, they will be disciplined; the content of their response, however, is another matter. Responses to petitions filed on the delivery-style platform resemble those elicited through petitioning on the local government's website. Many citizens, regardless of whether they petitioned in person or online, described the responses from the petition office as "perfunctory," "sending people away" and "not solving the problem."⁵⁹ This reflects a major problem with the delivery-style petition system, namely that intractable disputes still cannot be effectively resolved. The pressures and demands to improve the efficiency of the petitioning process have led to resentment among grassroots officials. Mr Wang, who had been working in the local petition office for the previous seven years, stated:

People who work in the petition office are either newly hired or disliked by the leaders. Everyone wants to leave because it is a very tough job. Our achievements are not valued, but if we make any mistake, we will be severely punished. You know, monitoring officials has also become much easier in the digital age. We have very few grassroots cadres who have been promoted, and becoming a section head (*zhengkeji* 正科级) is already the end.⁶⁰ Unlike those working in the economic and organizational departments, who can easily get promoted, we cannot see the future even if we do well!⁶¹

57 The Joint Conference on Letters and Visits is a working mechanism established by Party committees and governments above the municipal and county level in accordance with the "Regulations on letters and visits work" (2022) issued by the Central Committee of the CCP and the State Council. Its aims are to prevent social disputes and avert their escalation, and to resolve disputes at the grassroots level. According to the principle of "he who is in charge is responsible," the Joint Conference on Letters and Visits is directly convened by district-level leaders, and multiple departments – such as the political and legal affairs commission, public security bureau, stability maintenance office, procuratorate, court, judicial bureau and petition bureau – are requested to cooperate in resolving disputes.

58 Interview with Ms Hao, a local official from the F District petition office, T City, 20 August 2023.

59 Interview with petitioners in F District, T City, 2 September 2023.

60 The ranks of CCP leaders range from the lowest deputy section head (*fukeji*) to the highest state leader (*zhengguoji*). For details of the 10 main political ranks, see Kou and Tsai 2014.

61 Interview with Mr Wang, a local official from the F District petition office, T City, 18 August 2023.

Following the introduction of accountability reforms by Xi Jinping in 2012, bureaucratic slack has been greatly reduced, particularly with the intensive measures taken against corruption and the increased political pressure; however, local officials now prioritize risk aversion over prosocial behaviour.⁶² When online petition cases pertain to non-local relationships – for instance, household registration and the education of migrants’ children – delivery-style petitions and digital technology can do little to resolve matters. The real solution lies in the fact that the petition office itself does not have the substantive power to address such issues effectively, as solutions involve multiple administrative departments, and disputes cannot be resolved if there is a lack of cross-departmental cooperation and coordination. As a result, the number of skip-level petitions (*yueji shangfang* 越级上访) has increased – despite an increased response rate – since the implementation of delivery-style petitions in F District, which indicates that the local petition office cannot effectively deal with the issues that arise via the online petition system.⁶³ Although some issues continue to be difficult to resolve via the delivery-style petition system, this new mode of petition and dispute resolution at the local level has received numerous accolades and has been promoted on the NBLV’s official WeChat account and the political learning platform, *Xuexi qiangguo* 学习强国,⁶⁴ as well as in *People’s Daily Online*, *Wenhui Daily*, *Xinmin Evening News* and other main news channels, as “urban grassroots Party building” and “urban petition release.” This has undoubtedly led to the increased recognition of local governments by higher authorities and given rise to the promotion of key leaders within petition offices (for instance, the top leaders of the F District petition office were appointed to the Discipline Inspection Commission in early 2024).

Cross-departmental collaboration and online mediation

To resolve social disputes more effectively, F District established a collaborative mechanism, which it refers to as “three offices one court” (*sansuo yiting* 三所一庭), in July 2022.⁶⁵ The “three offices one court” is led by the judicial office (*sifasuo* 司法所) in coordination with the police stations (*paichusuo* 派出所), law firms (*lüshi shiwusuo* 律师事务所) and people’s courts (*renmin fating* 人民法庭). Based on close cooperation and information sharing between various departments and the petition office, conflicts and social stability risks can be detected and addressed more efficiently through coordinated online mediation. For collective, urgent and intractable cases, all departments are expected to work together in a closed loop of receiving, investigating, handling, tracking and resolving conflicts.

In June 2023, more than 30 migrant workers from a construction site in F District went to the street judicial office to file a petition about their unpaid wages. After investigation by the petition office, the owner of the construction site was found to have delayed paying the wages of more than 130 migrant workers; the situation was deemed to be a serious collective conflict. To prevent the dispute from escalating, the judicial office immediately referred the matter to the “three offices one court.” First, the public security bureau contacted the construction site owner, informing him that withholding wages without reason is illegal and ordering him to pay the workers’ wages as soon as possible. Second, to avoid mass petitions, the petition office contacted the leaders of the migrant workers and asked all petitioners to accept online mediation. Mr Ma, one of the migrant workers, stated that “as long as the problem is solved, any method of resolution is acceptable.”⁶⁶ Therefore, in early July, in the mediation conference room of the F District petition office, officials from the street

62 Zhong and Zeng 2024.

63 Skip-level petitions are those that are elevated to be dealt with by a higher level.

64 *Xuexi qiangguo* is a national learning platform launched by the Central Committee of the CCP on 1 January 2019. It aims to provide political, cultural and other learning resources and activities that will help to strengthen the learning and construction of China, and to promote the learning of the Party’s theories and practices. It is an important platform for enhancing ideological education and CCP control in the new era governed by Xi Jinping.

65 The mechanism of “three offices one court” has been widely applied in Zhejiang since March 2022 and was called the “shared court” (*gongxiang fating*). It promotes online mediation via the cooperation of a variety of government agencies.

66 Interview with Mr Ma, a migrant worker in F District, T City, 7 September 2023.

judicial office and the petition office, legal mediators and district court judges jointly conducted online mediation via video conferencing. The construction site owner ultimately agreed to pay the outstanding wages within ten days.

However, one of the migrant workers, Mr Liu, went to the petition office and demanded that his salary be paid within five days. Ms Fang, a member of the petition office staff, informed him that, “according to the mediation agreement, you should understand that it may not be possible to achieve payment within five days as the boss is also facing financial difficulties and has promised to pay within ten days.”⁶⁷ Upon hearing this, Liu became very angry and shouted back at her: “You are maliciously and deliberately avoiding responsibility!” He proceeded to insult Ms Fang and complained to the district disciplinary commission about her bad attitude and “inaction” in response to the petitioners’ appeals. Ms Fang felt very aggrieved by this:

At that time, I had just been working as a receptionist at the petition office for about two months and really lacked judgement and skills. Mr Liu requested a meeting with the district leader, but I was unable to respond and was insulted by him. The disciplinary commission informed the petition office of this situation, and the responsible leaders of the petition office talked to me about it (*yuetan* 约谈).⁶⁸ Faced with such unreasonable petitioners, I was disciplined instead of being recognized for solving their problems. So, now I know the consequences of “serving the people wholeheartedly” when managing petition cases.⁶⁹

Although the dispute was ultimately resolved through the “three offices one court” mechanism, the local official handling the dispute was still held accountable. This had a significantly negative impact on the official’s enthusiasm for her work, especially when interacting with her superiors. Ms Fang went on to explain:

At that time, I was posted here [as a civil servant] owing to professional limitations, and only the petition bureau offered me a position. The complaints from migrant workers didn’t have a significant impact on my career, but they led my superiors to form a negative impression of me. I could understand their thoughts, but I also felt aggrieved. Our leader used this case as a typical reminder to all staff in the petition office. Although he didn’t mention specific names, every time he brought it up, I felt hurt. The sadness and frustration were really overwhelming. Now I know that we shouldn’t be too enthusiastic or sympathetic towards petitioners, we should be cold and neutral!⁷⁰

The “three offices one court” mechanism demonstrates that digital technology can achieve the effective resolution of disputes by enhancing departmental collaboration. However, excessive punishments and low incentives can have a detrimental effect on the enthusiasm of local officials in the petition office. This is particularly concerning when they genuinely want to help petitioners resolve their problems. When presented with unreasonable demands or unfair complaints from petitioners, the officials find themselves in a predicament: they cannot adequately address the issues nor can they satisfy their superiors. In such circumstances, local officials will assume an indifferent attitude towards petitioners (for example, by adopting a “poker face” or using a cold tone to discourage

67 Interview with Ms Fang, a local official from the F District petition office, T City, 8 December 2023.

68 “Dialogue with a member of the political bureaucracy” is a unique system with Chinese characteristics. It refers to quasi-administrative actions taken by agencies with administrative powers to correct and regulate problems in the operation of subordinate organizations through communication, learning policies and regulations, analysis and evaluation.

69 Interview, Ms Fang.

70 Ibid.

protesters⁷¹) to avoid punishment. While perfunctory responses may not lead to punishment, complaints from petitioners can be a serious problem. The director of the local petition office in F District also admitted that:

Often, it is difficult to please petitioners, and some direct their grievances with functional departments at us. They follow us, abuse us or even beat us up. And the current situation dictates that whether the petitioners' complaints are reasonable or not, we will be held accountable for mishandling them. It's more difficult for me to satisfy petitioners than it is to please my superiors.⁷²

As a result, local petition officials may adopt a mechanical approach when responding to petitions, focusing on meeting their superiors' expectations rather than genuinely attempting to address the public's concerns.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study explores a new approach to public participation and dispute resolution in China: the online petition. In particular, our analysis focuses on three online petition mechanisms – petitioning via the government website, the delivery-style petitioning app and collaborative online mediation. While these online petition mechanisms provide an additional channel through which the public can convey their grievances or recommendations to the government, the resolution of specific issues still depends on several factors, including the complexity of the problem, the top leader's priorities and the collaboration of various administrative departments, as the petition office lacks the direct authority to address such issues.

However, in the face of stricter accountability and disciplinary measures, grassroots cadres have exhibited a mechanical responsiveness when addressing public complaints and petition issues in three key aspects. First, they may selectively choose the petition cases that are likely to have a favourable outcome, thereby creating an appearance of responsiveness to the online public in order to meet the assessment criteria set by their superiors in the bureaucratic system. This behaviour aligns with the concept of “cosmetic responsiveness,” where local officials will project a responsive image to appease the public and impress their superiors for career advancement.⁷³ Second, while local petition officials may receive and process petition issues more quickly through mobile phone apps – even reaching a completion rate of 100 per cent, as the delivery-style petition case shows – intractable problems remain difficult to solve. In particular, the stringent accountability and disciplinary measures mean that the priority for many local cadres in the petition office is to win the praise and recognition of their superiors so that they may be transferred to other departments. Third, although there is an emphasis on cross-departmental cooperation when dealing with petition cases, local officials have to engage in emotional labour when mediating disputes. Even when they proactively respond to petitioners' demands, they may still be held accountable if the outcome is not acceptable to the petitioner or their superiors. Of course, local officials' mechanical responsiveness to the public and their superiors is not mutually exclusive when handling petition cases; without the threat of disciplinary measures, however, the street-level bureaucrats would not feel the need to “perform.”⁷⁴

This study of the online petition system in China contributes to the study of the Chinese *xinfang* system and authoritarian responsiveness by adding more insight into the factors shaping responsiveness. It reveals that under digital authoritarianism, digital technologies have not only enabled the CCP to reinforce its scrutiny of society – especially those petitioners who may spark social protest

71 Hou 2020.

72 Interview with Ms Xu, the vice-director of the F District petition office, T City, 2 January 2024.

73 Wang and Han 2023.

74 Ding 2022.

and unrest – but, more importantly, they have also reshaped the internal dynamics of the Chinese petition system by imposing stricter discipline and punishment on local officials. As a result, front-line officials, who are tasked with defusing social discontent and maintaining political stability, lack the capacity to substantively respond to citizen demands. Instead, they respond in a hollow and perfunctory manner to placate their superiors.

While not all petition cases receive satisfactory responses and resolutions, the online petition system helps the party-state to absorb potential protests in a non-violent manner by providing a platform for public expression, particularly in a climate where the room for contentious participation is increasingly restricted under Xi's governance.⁷⁵ In addition, the specific response time allowed by online petitions helps to avoid direct conflict compared with offline petitions, effectively serving as a cooling off period for public grievances. Most importantly, the online petition mechanisms also hugely facilitate the reception and processing of citizens' complaints and appeals using digital technologies, in contrast to traditional means of petitioning. There is no doubt that digital technologies significantly enhance the oversight and accountability of grassroots officials by strengthening public scrutiny.⁷⁶ However, as a vulnerable sector, the petition office lacks the capability to solve problems directly and is merely a coordinating body. Simply putting pressure on petition officials without offering any incentives will inevitably negatively impact their morale and enthusiasm for their work, leading them to act in a perfunctory and unproductive manner. This, in turn, impairs the effective resolution of social disputes and poses challenges to social stability. In fact, without legal and regulatory reforms, it is difficult to prevent social risks and disputes at the source by simply innovating dispute resolution methods, even using digital technologies, as the resolution of administrative disputes through *xinfang* requires due process and justice.

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⁷⁵ Fu and Distelhorst 2018.

⁷⁶ Huang and Yu 2019.

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