Information Capacity and Social Order:
The Local Politics of Information Integration in China

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Abstract:

How do regimes employ information to govern society and maintain control? Recent scholarship argues that legibility is a fundamental component of state capacity, but the politics of information collection and use remain incompletely understood. This article examines how the local state in China uses information to amplify legibility and bolster social control. Extant literature focuses largely on information *collection*, but Chinese officials have adopted high-tech information management platforms to solve a different issue: inadequate information *integration* across bureaucracies ("information islands"). Information integration platforms strengthen the local state's ability to govern by enhancing intra-bureaucratic accountability and improving the local state's ability to demobilize contention. At the policy level, adoption of these platforms has implications for the Chinese party-state's ambitions for social stability; their global spread could affect trends in governance worldwide. Theoretically, our findings indicate that legibility depends not just on the state's ability to collect information, but to integrate it as well.

Keywords: authoritarian, China, legibility, information, integration, stability

How do regimes use information to govern society and maintain control? Legibility, or the state's ability to obtain information on citizens, is a central component of state capacity.[1] The processes by which data is collected, legibility generated, and information used to govern, however, remain incompletely understood. We examine how local governments in authoritarian political systems obtain and use information to govern, with an empirical focus on China.

Most studies of information, both in Chinese politics and in comparative studies of governance more broadly, focus on information *collection* as the key step in achieving legibility. We find, however, that the contemporary Chinese party-state's efforts are equally if not more focused on a second, distinct challenge: that of information *integration*. Although "fragmented authoritarianism" as a concept has long been used to describe Chinese politics,[2] little research thus far has been able to trace how different sources of information get integrated inside the "black box" of local government to inform policy implementation. This creates a gap in our ability to understand how bureaucratic fragmentation affects the party-state's ability to translate information into actual legibility. Indeed, there is as yet little comparative work assessing how local legibility-generating mechanisms perform in contexts of bureaucratic fragmentation and disjuncture.

We address this question by analyzing the construction of local informational capacity in China. In China today, high-tech surveillance projects that seek to bolster the regime's ambitious vision of social control frequently make headlines -- but behind those headlines, the fragmentation of China's authoritarian bureaucracy complicates the state's ability to carry out its aims in everyday governance. Drawing on a newly collected dataset, we explore the gradual, nationwide adoption of a local governance technique intended to facilitate information integration: coordination platforms that use technological infrastructure to integrate data gathered via community grid management (*shequ wanggehua guanli,* CGM). We then conduct a detailed case study of a single urban district in eastern China, where access to the institutions and processes that both generate and confound local

informational capacity reveal how these programs work from the inside. The story of how actors within the local party-state have simultaneously pursued, contested, and constrained efforts at legibility and regime control speaks to the heart of political power -- and weakness -- in one of the largest and most consequential political systems in the world.

We find that local officials have focused on bolstering informational capacity as a major tool for maintaining social control—a critical performance metric that determines officials' prospects for advancement.[3] In contrast to the existing focus on problems of information collection, however, we focus on the problem Chinese officials have termed "information islands" (*zhengfu xinxi gudao*)[4]-- the lack of integration of information within the local party-state. We show that recent efforts have focused on resolving this issue through the introduction of technological platforms aimed at integrating bureaucratically-siloed sources of information, as the core technique by which the party-state hopes to improve the legibility of the society it governs.

We then assess the implications of these efforts for governance. First, these efforts improve monitoring and accountability within the party-state itself. Second, they facilitate social control: officials use data integration platforms to decide whether local challenges are best resolved via service provision or via more coercive forms of demobilization. Information integration does not change the approaches used, but alters the algorithms by which the state decides which approach is applied to which individuals in their jurisdictions. It is as-yet unclear whether the introduction of these platforms will actually resolve perennial problems of local fragmentation, as advocates in the system have hoped; this section also explores several implementation challenges that offer a useful corrective to media portrayals emphasizing the surveillance state's aspirations to omniscience. Nonetheless, these efforts represent a significant investment in the "infrastructural power" of the local party-state, and have altered the contours of local governance and local state-society relations.

We conclude by discussing the ways in which these findings are relevant beyond China. This relevance is practical, as the development of information and communication technology may encourage the use of data-integration platforms for public security and governance in other countries, and China has provided these kinds of platforms to a growing number of countries in the international system. It is also theoretical, in that our core argument about the importance and difficulty of information *integration* applies to any attempt to generate legibility within a fragmented political context. Our findings therefore contribute to fast-growing literature on the micropolitics of information, contention, and repression, in China and beyond, and to discussions of informational capacity and governance in authoritarian and democratic systems worldwide.[5]

Information Integration, Legibility, & Social Order

Information management is a central task for states. Classic works argue that a certain information base is vital for the state to execute administrative functions, and essential to generating "infrastructural power."[6] Studies of one facet of infrastructural power, public service provision, conclude that state capacity to deliver services depends on *legibility*: "breadth and depth of the state's knowledge about citizens and their activities."[7] Information is equally critical to another core task of the Weberian state: the maintenance of public order. Knowledge about the population facilitates spatial control over geography and citizenry, and assists police or security forces with threat identification and management.[8]

Current evidence, however, also suggests that information management is difficult, especially for non-democratic states.[9] Citizens falsify preferences to evade state coercion; rumors proliferate in the absence of trust in government; and subordinates misrepresent information to superiors to avoid punishment.[10] Fragmentation of institutions, a common coup-proofing technique, further limits organizations' ability to obtain accurate intelligence on citizen beliefs and behavior,[11] and can create 'turf wars' that lead to inconsistencies in governance.[12] Regimes that can resolve informational

problems and generate legibility have comparative advantages in maintaining public order and social stability, but many struggle to do so.

Scholarly understanding of these information dynamics, moreover, is hampered by a relative dearth of research on the politics of legibility and informational capacity at the local level. As Koss (2016:12) argues, "state strength is a combination of strength out in the realm and strength at the center."[13] Most work on information capacity under authoritarianism, however, focuses on national-level policies like census or statistical agencies;[14] studies of China have similarly focused primarily on central plans and agencies.[15] How central policies on information are translated and refracted to the local level, where informational capacity is actually generated and deployed, remains poorly understood.

China provides a paradigmatic example of the importance and difficulty of state information management. Accurate information on citizen preferences is difficult to obtain without traditional democratic mechanisms.[16] Monitoring, or obtaining information on government performance, is also difficult when officials distort or conceal upward reporting of economic statistics and citizen grievances for self-protection and self-advancement.[17] Fragmentation across "different agencies within a single local state" further hampers official efforts to get the information necessary to supervise civil society.[18] There is as yet relatively little analysis of how the party-state has approached the internal management of information at the local level, where national policies are implemented but applied to varying local contexts, and where fragmentation and other information problems appear.[19]

A significant body of scholarship on Chinese politics does address the party-state's attempts to collect information through multiple mechanisms: national/local people's congresses and consultative bodies; protests; 'porous censorship' of social media; and local institutions such as petition offices and mayor's mailboxes that collect citizen feedback and provide officials with information on residents' preferences, grievances, and beliefs about government performance.[20] This attention is warranted: China has a long history of citizen-based intelligence provision,[21] and Xi Jinping

has warned that insufficient attention to information collection could "blind' the party, a caution subsequently reinforced by Central Committee/State Council guidance.[22]

Few studies, however, trace what happens after information collection occurs. How is information subsequently amalgamated to generate legibility, and then distributed for decision-making and policy implementation? Scholars should not assume that information *collection* equals information *capacity*: fragmentation limits the extent to which information collected by one agency can be leveraged by the local state writ large. Translating legibility and informational capacity into effective governance requires not just collection but integration.[23] In fact, as we show below, many recent CCP efforts to improve information capacity, especially in the realm of public security and social order, have been focused on this integrative task.

A second body of literature addresses how the Chinese party-state exercises social control at the grassroots level.[24] However, this scholarship is (naturally) more focused on visible processes of state-society interaction than the organization of behind-the-scenes work within the bureaucracy, the way the party-state has redefined roles and responsibilities for today's "stability maintenance" and "social management" tasks, or the role that efforts at information integration play in this process. Both bodies of literature also rely for their empirics primarily on the Jiang or Hu-Wen era.[25] This leaves unanswered questions about the degree of continuity vs. change in these practices under Xi Jinping, in an era when China's stringent controls and tightening policies in the realms of national security and "social management" have occupied an ever-more central place in Chinese governance.[26]

Local Fragmentation & "Information Islands"

Coordinating China's numerous stability maintenance organizations has long been a thorny bureaucratic problem. Multiplication of actors within a locality, and poor communication with other localities and the center, disrupt officials' ability to receive accurate, timely information about on-the-ground developments.[27] Fragmentation within the local party-state under Hu Jintao, for example,

meant that various actors, all with a general mandate to maintain social stability, nevertheless followed distinctive bureaucratic mandates, collected different information, and employed divergent tactics to address contention—resulting in often-contradictory overall governance.[28]

China's "fragmented authoritarian" bureaucracy, particularly the system of overlapping vertical departments (*tiao*) and horizontal local authorities (*kuai*), exacerbates local information-sharing and information-management problems.[29] *Kuai* are responsible for stability maintenance, and their performance is a veto indicator for these officials' promotion, but coercive power is actually controlled and operated vertically by *tiao*; at the township/street level, police stations (*paichusuo*) are vertically administered and responsible to their county/district functional superiors (*gong'anju*) rather than horizontally to the township/street government offices. This stovepiping can make it hard for *kuai* to access needed information. Moreover, *tiao* lack regular information-sharing mechanisms even *within* their ministries (e.g. Public Security).[30] Under these conditions, the structure of the local party-state's information systems can ignore, distort, or hide information from local officials, including on potential unrest, because it exists in isolated pockets where it cannot be accessed to illuminate society and render its flashpoints legible.

China's central leaders have for some time tried to reduce fragmentation and enhance information-coordination across the organizations responsible for stability maintenance. In 2000, Jiang Zemin initiated a Central Leading Group for National Security; in 2004, the Ministry of Public Security announced "integrated intelligence structures" to improve coordination among its departments.[31] The CCP also promoted ideas of "coordinated social management" (*xietong zhili*) and e-governance during the Hu-Wen era that included some attention to information fragmentation.[32]

These efforts have accelerated under Xi Jinping. In 2014, Xi launched the Central National Security Commission (*zhongyang guojia anquan weiyuanhui*, CNSC), which he chairs and which outranks other leading small groups, focused on "comprehensive national security" (*zongti guojia anquanguan*); unlike its American counterpart, the CNSC's focus is predominantly internal.[33] Its stated aim is to
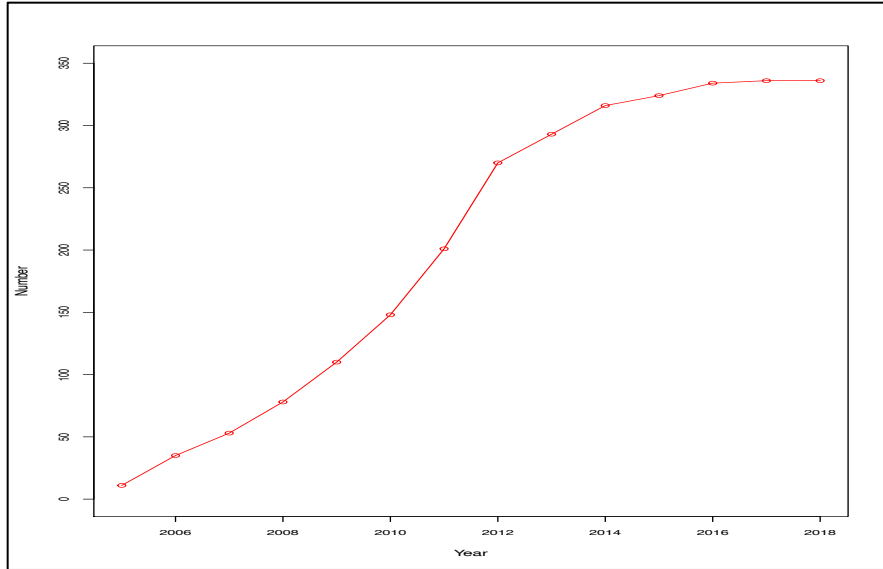
improve intelligence-sharing and policy coordination, and reduce the fragmentation that prevented previous leaders from receiving timely information. [34] Other changes to China's national-level bureaucracy under Xi, such as reorganization of the People's Armed Police (2017-18) and passage of a National Intelligence Law (2017) to "unify and centralize" intelligence systems and "coordinate division of labor" have also sought to align and integrate previously fragmented intelligence and national security authorities, and reform the political-legal system responsible for internal stability.[35]

Localities are regarded as critical sites that translate information into legibility and generate social order, and parallel efforts have unfolded to address social stability at the grassroots level. In 2014, Shanghai's then-Party chief Han Zheng, now a Politburo Standing Committee member, designated "grassroots social governance" the city's "No. 1 research project." Shanghai produced a new policy emphasizing information-based social management: it required streets, townships, residential communities, and villages to establish comprehensive information platforms for big-data analysis and called for dissolution of 'information islands.'[36] In 2016, the 13th Five-Year Plan for National Informatization (2016-2020) described the problems and waste associated with "information islands," and emphasized the need to connect the information systems of different ministries and departments.[37] Following the 19th Party Congress, in 2017 the CCP directed local governments to establish comprehensive information platforms that would integrate information provision and grassroots self-governance with community grid management.[38]

Community grid management (CGM) is often described as a Maoist-era phenomenon, but its modern incarnation depends heavily on technological infrastructure, and has become commonplace in China over the course of the past decade. Most of China's prefectural-level cities adopted CGM systems over the 2005-2018 period. As with other policies, grid management began as a series of local experimental pilots that were scaled up, and eventually applied country-wide.[39] Figure 1 shows the temporal pattern of prefectural-level units' adoption of community grid management:[40]

Figure 1: Prefectural-Level Units in China Using Community Grid Management

By late 2018, community grid management platforms had been incorporated into local governance across contemporary China, though they received relatively little attention in English-language media. During the coronavirus outbreak of 2020, however, they became more well-known, as the Politics & Law Commission in Hubei (pop. 59million) mobilized 170,000 grid workers to collect data on residents and enforce provincial lockdown.[41] Similarly, in the district we focus on below, M District, grid patrolmen reported quarantine violations, tallied mask supplies in community pharmacies, identified suspected infections, traced newcomers to blocked-off neighborhoods, and supervised food distribution for quarantined residents. These systems collected information for timely pandemic response in the district, allowing the grids to serve as the "roots of the state" during local efforts at pandemic control.[42]

Community grid management, therefore, depends on organized information collection, but it also relies heavily on a back-end platform that is capable of integrating the data that frontline workers collect with data from other sources in order to create comprehensive legibility. The next section illustrates how this process works.

Informational Capacity and Local Stability: The Case of M District

Our case study of M District unpacks the "black box" of domestic information collection and coordination at the grassroots level in urban China.[43] M District is a fairly typical district in a large eastern Chinese city, with a district population of around two million. Like many Chinese cities, M District has experienced dramatic socioeconomic change—rapid industrialization, urbanization, and rural in-migration—posing challenges to social management. Urban expansion led to predatory land expropriation and house demolition, prompting residents to engage in petitioning, protests, marches, sit-ins, demonstrations, and other forms of urban contentious politics. District police also identified the migrant population, around half the district's residents, as a major source of crime and instability.[44] Illegal housing and renting sprawled in urban villages, underground businesses multiplied, and reports of prostitution, gambling, and drug abuse accelerated. By 2009, M District had the city's highest crime rate.

As noted above, M District experienced these changes during a period in which China had begun to experiment with community grid management. CGM was adopted by Beijing's Dongcheng District in 2004, then city-wide in 2005. That same year, the Ministry of Construction selected 27 cities as pilot sites to experiment with grid management, including the one where M District is located.[45] By 2007, the city's Construction and Communications Commission had established a CGM system. Responding to perceived central-level encouragement, however, the police also established their own grid systems, as did other actors within the city's bureaucracy.

In 2007, M District's public security officials began a review of their efforts, which expanded into a more comprehensive review by the Politics & Law Committee the next year. These reviews identified a number of shortcomings in the District's approach to social management (a term that indicates a combination of preventing crime and instability and improving overall urban governance). As a result, in 2009, District leaders initiated what they termed the "Great Coordination Program"

(GCP), which aimed to unify information-management and coordinate fragmented local agencies to improve social management. The GCP was run by a District Leading Small Group and its operational office, which were headed by the Party chief and District governor and included leaders of townships/streets and district-level departments/bureaus. (For example, the district office of comprehensive social management was a member of the GCP's operational office.) The GCP was funded by district public finance, and recruited its own full-time staff.

Analysis of those efforts, below, draws on research conducted between 2012 and 2019. We read extensively through local news coverage; consulted District assessments, reports, and plans that defined problems and proposed solutions; interviewed over forty officials, staff, retired cadres, urban residents' committees, and residents; and followed announcements on local social media. Together, these sources illuminate how local officials viewed informational capacity and its role in governance, and how these views translated into concrete policy change over time, particularly with respect to information integration.

Preventive Governance & Information Capacity

In the eyes of M District's leaders, the reason for adopting the GCP and grid management was to be able to more effectively prevent instability and social unrest, at a time when China's political system had begun to encourage more proactive and preventive approaches to maintaining social order. The GCP's preventive emphasis reflected broader shifts in emphasis toward foreknowledge (*xianzhi*) and timeliness (*jishi*) that appear in Chinese public security writings.[46] Under this framework, competently defusing a protest was acceptable, but inferior to preventing protest in the first place, especially for local officials whose promotions could be vetoed by one major incident. Minister of Public Security Meng Jianzhu therefore directed local leaders to seek accurate, actionable information to forecast (*yuzhi*), forewarn (*yujing*), and prevent (*yufang*) threats to political security and social stability.[47] M District rhetoric echoed these goals: district police noted, "The major reason for

deterioration of public security was that our first-front work was insufficient; small grassroots issues became big problems at the top."[48]

In order to carry out preventive approaches to stability maintenance, M District emphasized that it needed timely information:

> We shall find out and report issues of social management at the first time, advance public service, manage society by providing good service, and turn *ex post* law enforcement into *ex ante* public service. Addressing disputes at the grassroots level and in the bud is good for resolving people's concerns and transforming our urban management from a reactive type into a proactive and adaptive one.[49]

It called to "move the focus downwards, the front forward, and management to the beginning."[50] A 2014 review of the GCP, written for the municipal government, described consensus among local officials that "proactively exploring problems" was better than "reactively waiting for problems," that "*ex ante* prevention" outperformed "*ex post* response," and that "systematic solution" exceeded "ad hoc treatment."[51] Officials commented that "timely, sufficient public service can largely prevent emergence of social unrest; social disputes in the bud are much easier to resolve." [52]

District officials believed, however, that they needed new information mechanisms to resolve long-standing information problems, particularly the issue of information fragmentation. One official explained:

> The GCP aims to coordinate information and forces scattered in many departments. If we build a comprehensive system of information collection and analysis, we can know in a timely way what's going on and take corresponding measures to prevent eruption of massive incidents…We can identify who is the 'troublemaker' and leader. With this kind of information, we can more effectively address problems and keep society in order.[53]

Officials distinguished between "infrastructural information" (*jichu xinxi*), collected regularly, and "emergent information" (*yingji xinxi*) collected during/after unrest or crisis. The GCP integrated and employed both types, but officials preferred and prioritized *ex ante* infrastructural information, which they believed would help gauge public sentiment, assess governance quality, identify problems, and

prevent disruptive contention. [54] Collection and analysis of *ex ante* infrastructural information, in other words, was a low-cost method of maintaining local stability. [55]

Here, however, M District officials confronted two problems: information blindness, and information islands. They defined the first as an outside-system (*tizhiwai*) problem and information islands as a within-system (*tizhinei*) one:
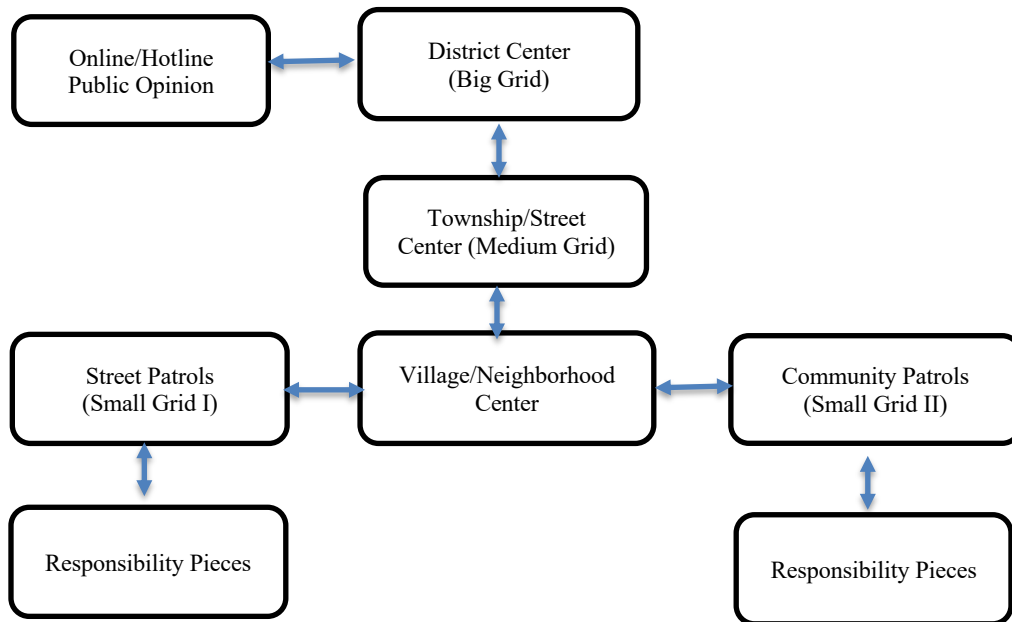
> To build a comprehensive information platform for our political-legal work, the government system needs to reach every corner of grassroots society and keep eyes on what is happening. Otherwise, government would be blind… Many *tiaos* have their own unique information and we lack a unified platform to coordinate scattered information. [56]

As noted above, more attention has been paid thus far to problems of reducing information blindness through improved collection. Accordingly, we focus our analysis principally on the challenges of information integration, though this requires us to explain some of the processes of information collection as well. [57]

Reducing "Information Islands"

M District's Great Coordination Program aimed to eradicate information islands by creating a single shared platform for community grid management, that would integrate information from multiple functional bureaucracies and local stakeholders into a single framework. In other words, the GCP was created to coordinate, use, and manage the information collected by CGM; CGM specifies the division of labor for information collection, while the GCP manages integration across departments and grassroots organizations. In 2016, the GCP operational office was renamed the "Center for Urban Grid Management," indicating this relationship. The District's grid system appears in Figure 2:

Figure 2: The Organizational Structure of M District's Great Coordination Program

The District is one "big grid"; townships/streets are medium grids; streets and residential communities/villages are small grids.[58] Small grids are further divided into "responsibility-pieces" (*zerenkuai*), each ~300-400 households (800-1000 residents) overseen by a manager (*kuaizhang*) and patrol team.[59] In other words, each neighborhood is divided into grids, and infrastructural information is uploaded into the grid management platform, with sensitive places marked if they required special attention or monitoring. A team monitors each cell; and information generated by frontline work and online activity is cross-laid onto the grid, enabling local officials to look horizontally across bureaucracies to manage their jurisdictions. By 2010, M District had 13 medium grids, divided into a) 75 small grids based on urban blocks (189 responsibility-pieces), and b) 516 more small grids based on residential communities/villages (1299 responsibility-pieces). 36,360 personnel were involved in grid management: one for every fifty residents. In 2019, leaders initiated "meticulous [grid] management," further dividing M District into 5589 responsibility-pieces, clarifying grid boundaries, and strengthening functional differentiation.[60]

A shared information platform run by the District GCP Center is the heart of the GCP and the grid management system that it oversees. All 52 district-level functional departments (from policing to public health to real-estate), 13 township/street governments, and 521 village/neighborhood GCP centers received shared software to handle information collection and processing; this both enabled and required them to upload their information into the GCP platform.[61] A "united big-data center" at the District level employs this information for public security intelligence and analysis. As one GCP director stated:

> Our [GCP] center is a big-data center. Let me make an analogy between policymaking and cooking. Our centers collect ingredients that are available for functional departments' cooking. They can cook whatever they want using our ingredients. I think that is helpful for scientific decision-making…but one precondition is that these functional departments share their own information with our center.[62]

At the township/street level, GCP centers established Information Synthesis Groups to integrate information from functional departments.[63] These centers coordinate residential community/street patrols, and integrate their reports with data provided upwards by the grassroots GCP centers.

The grassroots GCP centers, in turn, collect and synthesize information from two types of small grids: residential communities and street patrols. In residential communities, villagers/residents' committees, public security associations (*zhibaohui*),[64] social workers, policemen, mediation committees, and property management companies collect "infrastructural information" on houses, residents, and enterprises. They are tasked to investigate, identify, and report possible conflicts and threats, paying special attention to public security challenges such as illegal housing/renting, illegal business, and other disputes. Beyond residential communities, urban law-enforcement officers and police teams patrol streets during the day and at night, respectively, and primarily collect information on city appearance, environmental sanitation, and public security. District directives emphasized 'proactive' work to identify and report emergent challenges as early as possible. Frontline reports from these two types of small grids were then integrated with online information from websites/hotlines: in 2016, 90% of information was collected on-the-ground, versus 10% from online intake.[65]

The diversity of the frontline information collectors involved in the GCP and in supplying information to the grid management system demonstrates the breadth of information that the GCP centers are intended to integrate. *Kuaizhang* lead teams of government officials and social assistants (*shehui xieguan*) who hold a diverse set of formal roles in local governance. One small grid, composed of 8 responsibility-pieces covering a few blocks, had 684 informant "eyes and ears," including 238 officials from 14 departments/bureaus with *bianzhi* (a civil service designation), and 446 employees without (Table 1).

Table 1: Sample Occupational Breakdown of Small Grid "Eyes and Ears"

	Occupation	Number of Personnel
Within-system employees	Police stations	40
	Auxiliary police	90
	Law enforcement	24
	Grid management supervisors	21
	City administration (appearance/environmental sanitation)	14
	River cleaners	17
	Environmental protection assistants	4
	Labor supervision assistants	7
	Forestry conservation technologists	21
Outside-system employees	Road cleaners	306
	City appearance conservators	43
	Green conservation coordinators	39
	Vehicle management staff	42
	Mess cleaners	16

These informants report to *kuaizhang*, who compile that information and report it to village/neighborhood GCP centers. Routine infrastructural information is reported monthly; information on emergent crises or threats is reported immediately.

Three other reorganizations that accompanied the creation of the GCP were intended to align information, budgets, and manpower with new organizational structures, which authorities hoped would prevent new "information islands" from appearing. The first was a restructuring of the grid technology itself. As noted above, when grid management was first introduced in the District, and

until 2009, each functional department (*tiao*) managed its own grid, resulting in multiple, overlapping-but-inconsistent grids related to social management and public security. Police patrolling, crime prevention, video surveillance/control, city management/law enforcement, and public service grids were separate and uncoordinated. The GCP integrated these grids into a single one for each geographic area, and assigned monitoring and responsibility to the corresponding *kuai*. This effort aimed for "three seamless connections"—streets with residential communities, daytime with night, and routine management with crisis management—by reducing informational barriers and connecting previously disparate data.

The second realignment focused on social assistants. In 2009, M District had 18,470 social assistant-informants of 26 different types, controlled by 16 different departments (typically those with work overloads but limited *bianzhi*) and managed by 194 labor organizations (*jiuye laodong zuzhi*).[66] While this meant that the local party-state was collecting an impressive breadth and diversity of information prior to 2009, much of that information was siloed and, at a practical level, unavailable for use in everyday governance. When the GCP was established, the District transferred social assistants (and their funding) from *tiao* to *kuai*, aligning budgets and personnel with new township/street responsibilities. Assistants received standard titles ("grid patrolman," *wangge xunchayuan*), responsibilities, pay, training, and evaluation. Each was assigned to a responsibility piece to patrol, collect infrastructural information, and assist local officials with security and public services, within the integrated GCP structure. The reform, in other words, brought information flowing in from dozens of different channels and merged it into a single information architecture.

Finally, the GCP reduced information islands by integrating online information with offline data. In addition to the apps that social assistants used to report data into the GCP system, multiple other technology-based sources generate information for the GCP: citizen calls/emails; netizen communications via the website; and local social media. Citizens can offer input via the District Mayor's Mailbox, the Party Affairs' Mailbox, and two hotlines (one municipal, one district-specific).

Cyberspace authorities also systematically collect information on public opinion and potential threats and upload their findings. Integrating these diverse sources of information was previously difficult; now, it occurs in automated format via the GCP platform. The Center records, classifies, overlays, and integrates incoming data with existing sources of information; analyzes and identifies cases of concern; and transfers them to departments or grids for action.

The GCP sought to eliminate information islands by integrating disparate information sources into a single technology platform. It synthesizes functional department information, incorporates data from grid patrolmen and community/street patrols, and fuses a patchwork of previously overlapping grids into a single system. It then overlays and integrates information from mailboxes, calls, emails, and surveillance into the same platform for big-data analysis and government action.

Implications of Information Integration for Governance

The GCP and its grid management system improved M District's ability to collect, integrate, understand, and act on information, thereby strengthening the local party-state's ability to "see" society in its jurisdiction. The process of translating information into legibility occurs in five basic steps. First, frontline officials identify and report problems via the grid system to the GCP. Second, the GCP platform processes and integrates this information with existing data. Third, the District GCP center analyzes information, classifies issues and threats, and assigns cases to departments or officials for resolution. Fourth, if cross-departmental or cross-grid action is required, the District center coordinates. Fifth, the GCP analyzes data for policy research on governance, and prepares reports for the leadership group on social management problems.

This informational capacity serves two purposes: it improves accountability within the party-state, and it assigns potential sources of conflict/instability to a particular "treatment" for resolution, thereby facilitating demobilization and social stability. Together, these mechanisms augment the infrastructural power of the local party-state.

The GCP improves accountability within the bureaucracy through data comparability and transparency. A unified information platform reduces inter-governmental information asymmetries between local leaders and subordinates, making cheating more difficult and increasing the difficulty of concealing or falsifying data on under-performance and corruption.[67] After assigning issues to departments/officials for resolution, the GCP monitors and evaluates the rate, efficiency, and effectiveness of response. It flags overdue cases (color-coded red) and publicizes these to officials and citizens, who can follow outcomes and grade responses on the GCP's website. This information is used in both *tiao* and *kuai* performance evaluations, as well as to supervise/evaluate lower-level GCP center performance. By allowing District leaders to compare the performance data reported by subordinates with feedback submitted directly from residents, the GCP offers an additional layer of agent monitoring and reduces the scope for local cadres' discretion and concealment.

The GCP's digital process also depersonalizes social ties in the bureaucracy. It reduces the ability of personal connections to interfere in policy implementation by making distortions transparent and visible to others. One interviewee noted, "in China, personal ties and dignity (*mianzi*) always bend the rules. We are close to each other, we can't take formal rules seriously…even leaders are reluctant to discipline violators. But this program addresses this problem because it is a machine that reminds and warns those departmental heads of their irresponsibility." [68] Technological depersonalization, combined with the digital transparency that the GCP offers, further enhances accountability.

Finally, the GCP strengthens accountability by streamlining and clarifying bureaucratic responsibilities. It pushes power and resources down to frontline levels in an effort to facilitate early detection and management, but also increases these actors' responsibility and accountability for social management outcomes. For example, in M District, at the time the GCP began, the imbalance of powerful *tiao* vs. responsible *kuai* had created suboptimal performance in stability maintenance. M District's police bureau reported not to its government, but to the municipal police bureau one level above; township-level police stations were vertically controlled by the district's municipal police

branch, rather than being horizontally accountable the township government where they operated. By contrast, the new platforms strengthens the ability of *tiao* officials to monitor subordinates' performance, and provides ways for horizontal *kuai* to oversee the performance of functional departments at their own levels, thereby addressing a central management challenge in China's decentralized bureaucracy.[69] By re-assigning social management leadership to township/street *kuai*, and reorganizing personnel and technological infrastructure to give them new tools, the GCP improved their ability to manage jurisdictions.[70] The 2009 blueprint described this as "three transformations": transforming two-level law enforcement at district and township/street into one-level law enforcement by township/streets; transforming siloed multi-*tiao* law enforcement into comprehensive law enforcement led by townships/streets; and [thereby] transforming *ex post* ways of reacting to problems into an *ex ante* regime of detecting problems.[71] Information integration, therefore, empowers grassroots agents while simultaneously increasing their responsibility and strengthening the mechanisms that monitor and hold them accountable for their performance.

Improved informational capacity also affects the state's infrastructural power by altering how the state manages potential contention and conflict from citizens. Local officials use information from the GCP's integrated data platform not simply to identify "troublemakers" (in the words of the official quoted above), but as a decision-making tool to decide what approach is most likely to demobilize them and prevent their grievances from causing social disorder, and then an accountability mechanism to ensure that the strategy most likely to be successful is actually implemented.[72]

For example, the GCP allows local officials to identify someone planning to petition and pull together information on their employment situation, housing, family needs, and welfare history to assess whether this person might be amenable to exchanging augmented welfare benefits -- or a straightforward payment -- for an agreement to desist from petitioning.[73] This concept is not unique to China; many authoritarian regimes provide concessions (patronage or public goods) to assuage dissent and limit contention.[74] Local officials in M District, however, leverage the integrated

information provided by the GCP to more strategically distribute various benefits. Previous literature has shown that local officials often distributed minimum livelihood payments (*dibao*) to targeted populations (*zhongdianren*) out of fear that they would engage in contentious behavior, but also found that these efforts are inefficient and mistargeted.[75] Under the GCP, local officials use the GCP platform and grid management to more effectively target concessions and services to prevent conflict and protest escalation.

M District relies on GCP-enabled analysis to generate overall recommendations for 'meticulous urban management' (*jingxihua guanli*),[76] but it is also employed to solve specific complaints from residents, especially when providing services in response to such complaints could prevent them from coalescing into collective action. GCP software also facilitates increased responsiveness to citizen complaints by reminding departments of case deadlines for service requests. Service provision ("serving the people") is described as "the foothold for grid governance…from resolving small neighborhood disputes to excluding major security risks."[77] In all of these cases, the GCP's data integration function is used to identify cases that need resolution, suggest concession or service provision as a possible strategy, and strategically distribute benefits to demobilize contentious activity. By eliminating grievances around which groups may mobilize, local officials reduce their willingness to challenge the party-state.

If the GCP's data shows that concession is unlikely to be a successful demobilization strategy, local officials can employ more coercive measures, such as threats intended to deter citizens from action.[78] For example, when one grid manager learned that residents who'd lost money in an illegal investment scheme planned to visit Beijing to complain, she visited the petition organizer's home with a mediator (*tiaojieyuan*) and police official (*minjing*). The team helped him "analyze his own responsibility for participating in illegal fundraising" and consider the "severe consequences and risks" (*yanzhong houguo he fengxian*) of pursuing extreme solutions -- thereby convincing him not only to cease his plans, but to help the authorities demobilize other frustrated investors.[79] The complex web of information

integrated into the GCP platform allows for individuals' housing, employment, social networks, and family to be leveraged in relational repression strategies aimed at preventive demobilization.[80] Even when the state offers mediation, the wealth of information available via the GCP generates an information asymmetry that enhances the state's bargaining power, as officials have more information than complainants on possible solutions, costs, and benefits.[81]

Finally, data integration can be used to target specific individuals for preventive detention and outright repression; it is especially useful in time-sensitive situations or when an individual's data shows that past attempts to demobilize them in other ways have failed. In M District's A Township, for example, where over 5,000 houses have been demolished since 2011, hundreds of angry petitioners planned to travel to Beijing to protest and petition. Using GCP information, township officials identified the movement's leaders, analyzed their complaints, and discovered their travel plans. Because travel was imminent, officials used the information to locate the "troublemakers," block their travel, and demobilize planned demonstrations.[82] Public profiles of grid managers describe them as providing the information necessary to catch criminals,[83] but the same processes can easily be used to dampen contention: for example, identifying repeat petitioners who can then be surveilled during "sensitive periods" and blocked from entering bus/rail stations or detained at home.[84] In these cases, the advantage conferred by real-time data integration under programs like the GCP is a tactical one, strengthening the party-state's ability to quickly and accurately deploy its coercive power to achieve its goals. Again, without the GCP-enabled capacity to integrate diverse sources of data and identify emergent risks, the local state would struggle to deploy this capacity consistently.

Data integration, therefore, allows local officials to assign specific governance strategies on an individualized basis.[85] It allows the regime to specify a preference ordering in terms of what approaches should be used, which M District did in 2009: it told local officials to first try the tools of governance and service provision (i.e. non-coercive ones) first, next to employ "social management" (a hybrid term that blends normal governance with more active, sometimes-coercive attempts to

maintain social stability), and only lastly to consider the direct use of law enforcement (i.e. policing and repression).[86] The full package of information on a citizen collected and integrated through the GCP is used to separate citizens and assign them to a specific approach based on the platform's assessment of whose grievances can likely be addressed by services/concessions, who can be coercively deterred, and who must simply be pre-empted.

This approach is both more individualized (based on highly integrated information on each individual) and more private (taking place in homes, as opposed to, for example, protest repression occurring in a public space). Personalized and private approaches serve to atomize potential grievances and lower the risk of backlash, while simultaneously allowing officials to promote public narratives about service provision and the local party-state's moral legitimacy.[87] (As noted above, during the coronavirus lockdown in early 2020, M District's grid managers simultaneously reported quarantine violations and provided services to quarantined residents, as individual residents' situations required.) Specificity also makes coercive threats more credible, because the state demonstrates its ability to identify and punish dissenting behavior. The improvement in information capacity and legibility provided by data integration programs like the GCP, therefore, enhances the state's infrastructural power in multiple ways.

Assessing Progress and Remaining Problems

The GCP and grid management produced major changes in M District's approach to informational capacity and governance, particularly vis-à-vis social management and stability maintenance. By 2012, local centers were collecting thousands of pieces of information a month, and reported high success rates in terms of cases resolved: in April 2012, for example, the GCP identified nearly 20,000 cases related to public security in the past year, and claimed to have resolved 90.5%.[88] Officials also believed that the accuracy of their information, a major concern in a district with a large migrant population and significant illegal housing, had improved as a result of being able to compare

different sources.[89] The amount of data reported into the GCP only grew over time; in 2019, District grids reported receiving over a million data points.[90] The District also credited the GCP with significant decreases in criminal activity: according to official reports, robbery dropped by 24% (2009-10), then 32.8% (2010-11).[91] While there are good reasons to view these statistics with skepticism, given well-known patterns of output distortion in China's statistical reporting,[92] the data are instructive in that they illustrate an official narrative of relatively sweeping success that was used to justify and advocate the continuation and eventual scaling-up of the program.

Indeed, municipal authorities saw the approach as successful enough that it was subsequently applied city-wide. As the municipal government scaled-up the GCP, social management rather than economic performance became the core of township/street performance evaluations.[93] Three years later, in the municipality's five-year social management plan, one of five 'priority projects' was a new city-wide information platform connecting all departments, districts, townships/streets, villages/neighborhoods, and social management grids.[94] The plan also aimed to strengthen grassroots social management and citizen involvement, integrate social organizations, and employ information-based dispute-prevention-and-resolution mechanisms —essentially replicating M District's efforts city-wide. The approach taken by the GCP was ultimately scaled to the national level, indicating an overall perception that it was a reform worth institutionalizing.[95]

Nevertheless, from the perspective of District officials, challenges remain. The first is that personnel need to embrace the new approach; older cadres and police trained in the era of "strike hard" policing are sometimes left behind or reluctant to embrace "policing by app."[96] One officer noted:

> Even if we design a good institution, we need men to run [it]… Some cadres are not adaptive or responsive to institutional innovation; some from functional departments still focus on economic growth and look down on maintaining social stability…others even think that collecting so-called infrastructural information is not useful for our work and it takes long time to see the real effect…they think the effect of 'hard strikes' is more immediate and visible.[97]

Second, although the GCP has expanded and systematized information collection and integration, internal assessments suggest a lagging capacity to *analyze* information, particularly in terms of human capital. The District GCP Center issues reports and produces analysis, but it remains largely descriptive, whereas authorities want it to be causal and predictive:

> Intelligence has two types: one provides us with direct clues to incidents or problems, and the other is an analytic one. Analytic intelligence can only be available by synthesizing fragmented observations and detecting the underlying causal relationship…it is hard to find qualified staff to do analytic work because it requires people with a good sense of reality as well as strong quantitative skills.[98]

The volume of information assembled by the GCP platform has outstripped local authorities' ability to leverage it effectively for urban governance and stability maintenance. However, this deficit may be temporary: central authorities have begun applying predictive policing to data generated by GCP-like platforms, and China has launched a major push to develop tech talent.[99]

A third issue with GCP-based information management involves continued resistance from functional departments, potentially the biggest losers in the redistribution of coercive power from *tiao* to *kuai*. Because the reforms associated with creation of the GCP further overarching stability maintenance goals while also serving other, specific bureaucratic interests, these tools have broadly-distributed support across the local party-state. Nevertheless, the inevitable bureaucratic 'losers' seek to protect prerogatives and resources, and are reluctant to embrace the GCP's enhanced accountability. One official observed, "information is power, information is resources; powerful district departments are reluctant to share information with township governments."[100] Moreover, even when district-level departments want to share data, their information systems often operate at the municipal-level, which GCP centers one level below cannot command or pull information from.[101] The district GCP center director complained:

> We have limited levers to make district-level functional departments accountable. One thing we are doing is sending a letter urging them to handle transferred cases as soon as possible…another possible solution is that we make departments' irresponsibility known to delegates to district Party Congress, People's Congress, Political Consultative Conference, and the masses and let these

actors supervise their behavior…but to make this happen, we need a top-level institutional design (*dingceng sheji*).[102]

The problems, in other words, are not just technical but political, meaning that they are likely to remain a source of contestation. Because M District sees notable successes, but still considers the GCP work-in-progress, it is likely to continue experimenting with ways to enhance the collection, integration, and use of information in the central tasks of social management and stability maintenance.

Conclusion

Efforts to strengthen informational capacity and generate legibility are key tools in authoritarian attempts to govern society and maintain public order; often, they must be implemented and maintained at the local level. In China, local officials have invested substantial resources in building informational capacity by using technology platforms to integrate previously disconnected "information islands" and surmount fragmentation and information siloes. Enhanced informational capacity strengthens the infrastructural power of the local party-state by improving intra-state bureaucratic accountability, as well as by helping the government optimize its responses to potentially troublesome incidents (or individuals) within society. Challenges persist, but the use of these integration platforms, in combination with technology-enabled grid management, marks a significant step in the infrastructural power of China's local authorities.

Theoretically, our findings suggest that current understandings of legibility should be revised to account not simply for the state's ability to collect information, but its capacity to store, integrate, and manage that information so that it can actually be employed in governing. Fragmentation can be a serious obstacle to this capacity if it means that information collection is not followed by information integration; to achieve legibility, central authorities must not only direct programs of sophisticated information collection, but must grapple with the technical and bureaucratic roadblocks to integration that can characterize governance at the grassroots. These conclusions provide important insights into

governance in the largest, most sophisticated non-democratic political system in the world today, but also speak clearly to the relationship between legibility, informational capacity, and governance worldwide.

Future research could productively refine the scope conditions of the theoretical logic advanced here. In many authoritarian systems, the coercive apparatus and domestic intelligence systems are fragmented for coup-proofing reasons;[103] we expect the kinds of information coordination problems we describe above to be especially acute in these contexts. We also expect that the dynamics we have illustrated above, regarding governmental efforts to resolve issues of fragmentation and legibility, are most likely to appear in places that bear some structural or institutional similarity to China: places that are characterized by single-party rule, and/or places where neighborhood committees play a key role in governance and social control, such as Cuba, the Soviet Union, or Rwanda.[104]

However, China is actively exporting data-integration technology platforms for policing and social control to a much wider range of countries, raising questions about how that technology will function in different political contexts. Huawei, for example, reports that it has installed "Safe City" platforms in over 100 locations; one recent study found that China had exported surveillance platforms for public safety to at least 80 countries.[105] Thus we may see transplanted efforts at technological integration without parallel bureaucratic integration across a wide range of political systems. Our findings suggest that the impact of technology may be limited if its introduction is not accompanied by corresponding bureaucratic and organizational reforms that push local actors toward information integration. Thus, the theoretical framework advanced here could shed light not only on *China's* efforts at information integration, but the pursuit of similar efforts around the world and the conditions that make these efforts likely to succeed or fail.

Our framework therefore also highlights a number of remaining empirical and theoretical questions. As China applies grid management and information-based public security platforms to rural

areas, additional research should examine whether information integration technologies work the same way, or have the same political effects, in less developed areas with lower population/infrastructure density. Future research could also investigate more systematically how officials use information to select strategies for different citizens, whether stronger informational capacity changes the overall allocation or distribution of strategies employed by a regime, and under what conditions changes to strategy allocation occurs. Finally, future work should explore how information integration efforts might play out in the different social, political, and bureaucratic contexts mentioned above, where fragmentation falls along different bureaucratic lines and citizen-participation in information provision is often less entrenched. For example, if an information integration technology platform of the type used in China is installed in a place without established bureaucracies and processes for information collection, how effective will the platform actually be in generating legibility? Alternatively, could a local state achieve effective information integration in the absence of a technological platform designed for that purpose? Each of these inquiries will help scholars, policymakers, and citizens refine the theoretical logic advanced above and assess the enduring importance of information integration for state projects of legibility, as well as elucidate the implications of China's current approach to local governance, for citizens in China and around the world.

Endnotes

[1] Lee and Zhang 2016; Brambor et al 2019; Scott 1998; Guriev and Treisman 2019.

[2] Harding 1981; Lieberthal and Oksenberg 1988; Lieberthal and Lampton 1992; Mertha 2009; Fu 2018.

[3] Unrest/instability is a veto performance indicator for promotion. Preventing social unrest is preferable because collective action is disruptive and costly to address *ex post*. Whiting 2004; O'Brien and Li 2006; Cai 2008; Li et al 2012; Chen 2012; Gao 2015.

[4] See, for example, Premier Li Keqiang's comments on the 13th Five-Year Plan of National Informatization, which refers to the need to focus on eliminating information islands (*zhengfu xinxi gudao*, 政府信息孤岛), http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2016-12/12/content_27638349.htm. One of the earliest uses of the term was in 2002 by Wu Jinglian, a prominent economist from the State Council's Development Research Center, who cautioned about information islands as a potential pitfall for China's promotion of e-governance: http://www.chinanews.com/2002-08-23/26/215075.html

[5] Chen 2012; Deng and O'Brien 2013; O'Brien and Deng 2015; Greitens 2016; Chen 2017; Fu 2018; Ong 2018a; Truex 2018; Mattingly 2019; Scoggins forthcoming; Pan 2020.

[6] Mann 1984 189; Giddens 1985; Whitehead 1995; Scott 1998.

[7] Lee and Zhang 2017:118; Soifer 2013; Hanson 2015; D'Arcy and Nistotkaya 2017.

[8] Fearon and Laitin 2003:80; Kalyvas 2006.

[9] Wallace 2014; Chen and Pan 2018.

[10] Kuran 1995; Chen and Xu 2017; Huang 2017; Wintrobe 1998; Charron and Lapuente 2011; Egorov, Guriev, and Sonin 2009; Gao 2015; Pan and Chen 2018.

[11] Rosen 2006; Woods et al 2006; Greitens 2016.

[12] Creemers et al 2020.

[13] See also Herbst 2000; Soifer 2008.

[14] Scott 1998; Lee and Zhang 2016; Brambor et al 2019; cf Hassan 2016.

[15] Wuthnow 2017; Xu 2020.

[16] Liebman 2005; Lorentzen 2014, 2015; Stockmann 2012; Chen and Xu 2017; Roberts 2018.

[17] Shirk 2011; Wallace 2014; Pan and Chen 2018.

[18] Fu 2017, 2018:50-65; Deng and O'Brien 2013; Lee and Zhang 2013; Ong 2018a, 2018b; Chen 2017; Scoggins and O'Brien 2016.

[19] Murray and Tanner 2007; Harding 1981; Lieberthal and Oksenberg 1988; Lieberthal and Lampton 1992; Mertha 2009; Fu 2018.

[20] Manion 2015; Truex 2016; Yan 2011; Lorentzen 2013, 2014, 2017; Dimitrov 2015; Chen and Xu 2017; King et al. 2013; Chen, Pan, and Xu 2016; Distelhorst and Hou 2017; Mattingly 2019; Jiang, Meng, and Zhang 2019.

[21] CCP 16th Central Committee, 4th plenary session, "Zhonggong Zhongyang gunyu jiaqiang dang de zhizheng nengli jianshe de jueding [Decisions on Enhancing Ruling Capacity]," 19 September 2004. See also Zhou Yongkang, "Jiaqing he gaijin shehui guanli, cujin shehui wending hexie," *Renmin Ribao,* 26 October 2006; Schwarck 2018:8-9; Schoenhals 2013:51; Dutton 2005:288-289.

[22] Xi Jinping, "Tantan diaocha yanjiu [Discussing field research]," 16 November 2011; CCP Central Committee/PRC State Council, "Guanyu jiaqiang shehui chuangxin guanli de yijian [Suggestions on Enhancing Social Management Innovation]," July 2011; "Innovation in social management," 20 September 2011, http://www.china.com.cn/policy/txt/2011-09/20/content_23451516.htm.

[23] One early effort by China's Ministry of Public Security sought to build public security intelligence systems (*gong'an qingbao tixi*) for "intelligence-led policing" (*qingbao zhidao jingwu*). We focus on cross-ministry efforts, the more recent focus. Schwarck 2018.

[24] See for example, Mattingly 2019; Pan 2020; Ong 2018a, 2018b; Koss 2018.

[25] Ang 2020.

[26] Greitens 2019.

[27] Lampton 2015:764; Guo 2012:2-3; Fu 2017.

[28] Fu 2017, 2018:10,50-65; Deng and O'Brien 2013; Lee and Zhang 2013; Ong 2018a/b; Chen 2017; Scoggins and O'Brien 2016.

[29] Wang 2010; Greitens 2017; Schwarck 2018:7-8; Wuthnow 2017:895.

[30] Wang 2010; Schwarck 2018:7-8; Wuthnow 2017:895.

[31] Schwarck 2018.

[32] CCP Central Committee and State Council, "Guanyu jiaqiang shehui chuangxin guanli de yijian [Notices on Improving Innovations in Social Management]," July 2011.

[33] CCTV, "Xi Jinping presides over first NSC meeting." 16 April 2014, http://news.xinhuanet.com/video/2014-04/16/c_126396289.htm; "NSC Members appear in *Xinwen Lianbo*," 17 February 2017, http://news.sohu.com/20170217/n481030722.shtml.

[34] Lampton 2015; Wuthnow 2017; You Ji 2016.

[35] NPC 2017; Zhao Lei, "Command of Armed Police unified," *China Daily,* 28 December 2017, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201712/28/WS5a441fa5a31008cf16da3d96.html; see also Greitens 2019.

[36] CCP Shanghai Municipal Committee/Shanghai Municipal Government, "Guanyu jinyibu chuangxin shehui zhili jiaqiang jiceng jianshe de yijian [Suggestions on Improving Innovations in Social Management and Enhancing Grassroots Construction]," 31 December 2014.

[37] http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2016-12/12/content_27638349.htm

[38] CCP Central Committee/PRC State Council, "Guanyu jiaqiang he wanshan chengxiang shequ zhili de yijian [Suggestions to Enhance/Improve Social Management in Urban and Rural Communities]," 12 June 2017. See also Tang 2019; Xi Jinping, 19th Party Congress report, 18 October 2017.

[39] On the general pattern of scaling up, see Heilmann and Perry 2011; Landry 2008; Rithmire 2014; on grid management, see Lin 2015; NDRC 2015; Wu 2014; Louise Lucas and Emily Feng, "Inside China's Surveillance State," *Financial Times*, 19 July 2018, https://www.ft.com/content/2182eebe-8a17-11e8-bf9e-8771d5404543; Paul Mozur, "Inside China's Dystopian Dreams," *New York Times,* 8 July 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/08/business/china-surveillance-technology.html; "China wants eyes and ears on every street," *Economist*, 30 June 2018, https://www.economist.com/china/2018/06/30/china-wants-eyes-and-ears-on-every-street.

[40] Original dataset compiled by the authors.

[41] Raymond Zhong and Paul Mozur, "To Tame Coronavirus, Mao-Style Social Controls Blanket China," *New York Times,* 15 February 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/15/business/china-coronavirus-lockdown.html; "On the frontline of epidemic prevention and control, nearly 170,000 Hubei grid members act," 7 February 2020, https://www.chahuxz.com/news/50626.html

[42] Read 2012.

[43] To protect interlocutors, we omit District, city, and program names. We avoid citing news coverage or listing internal report titles where it would identify the District. IRB [redacted].

[44] M District Government, *Report on Stability Maintenance*, 2009. Hereafter M District 2009. On state surveillance of floating populations, see Batke and Ohlberg 2020.

[45] Ministry of Construction, People's Republic of China. 2005. "Guanyu tuiguang Beijing shi Dongchengqu shuzihua chengshi guanli moshi de yijian [Instructions on Spreading Beijing Dongcheng District's Digital Model of Urban Management]." July.

[46] Schwarck 2018.

[47] Meng Jianzhu, "Tuijin gong'an xinxihua jianshe, goujian wu fengxi fangkong wangluo [Promote public security informatization construction, create seamless prevention and control networks]." *China News.* 12 January 2009, http://www.chinanews.com/gn/news/2009/12-01/1992812.shtml.

[48] Interview, local police station head, 23 June 2015.

[49] M District 2009.

[50] M District 2009.

[51] M District Government, *Report on GCP and City Management,* 2014. Hereafter M District 2014.

[52] Interview, Public Security Bureau researcher, 24 June 2015.

[53] Interview, district-level GCP center director, 21 September 2012.

[54] M District 2009.

[55] Mann 1984.

[56] Interview, Committee on Comprehensive Social Management, 22 September 2012.

[57] There is no question that District officials took seriously Xi's calls to employ the mass line to decrease blindness. One interviewee noted, "Our party's tradition and strength is the mass line. On stability maintenance, the mass line is relevant and helpful. The masses' eyes are bright; they can be the eyes of the blinded government." Interview, officer in charge of GCP information synthesis, 12 October 2017.

[58] M District, *GCP Manual,* 2012.

[59] In villages, responsibility pieces are divided based on rural households.

[60] M District Grid Management Work Summary, GCP WeChat account, 2019.

[61] Major departments/bureaus include: Office of Comprehensive Social Management, Construction/Transportation Committee, Administration on City Appearance and Environmental Sanitation, Legislative Affairs Office, and Bureaus of Urban Management & Law Enforcement; Police; Real Estate, Water Affairs, Industry and Commerce, Health, Environmental Protection, Human Resource Management and Social Security.

[62] Interview, GCP Director, 5 July 2018.

63 Including the Office of Comprehensive Social Management; Population Office; Urban Management and Law Enforcement Team; Petition Bureau; and Police, Environmental Protection, Real Estate, Industry and Commerce, and Justice Stations.

64 Public Security Associations address social disputes and keep community order. They work under the leadership of local police stations and residential community Party branches, and have a director, deputy, several small-group leaders, and members.

65 M District, *Grid Management Annual Data Report,* 2016.

66 M District 2009. On non-*bianzhi* hiring, see Zenz and Leibold 2017.

67 Gao 2020 and Gao and Tan 2020 find that this is an overall effect of digitalization in the Chinese governance system. On "output distortion" in social stability maintenance, see Gao 2015.

68 Interview, M District Public Security Bureau officer, 5 July 2018.

69 On decentralization and downward management: Landry 2008; Mei and Pearson 2014, 2017.

70 Here the GCP returned to traditional emphasis on local horizontal actors' responsibility for public security; Tanner and Green 2007.

71 M District 2009.

72 Roberts (2018) notes similar dynamics: porous censorship creates informational barriers between educated, affluent citizens (more likely to circumvent censorship), and average citizens (less likely).

73 Some grid managers help petitioners find employment or obtain benefits/services in exchange for ceasing petition activity. Others offer more straightforward payoffs; one official described paying a resident 2,000RMB not to petition Beijing as "very economical." Liao and Tsai 2018; "Wo shenbian de wanggeyuan [Grid patrolman alongside me]," Nanjing CCP, Politics and Law Committee, 4 June 2018, http://www.njzf.gov.cn/cxwghshzl/201806/t20180604_5416204.html

74 Gandhi and Przeworski 2006; Gallagher and Hanson 2009; Benney 2016; Distelhorst and Hou 2017.

75 Pan 2020.

76 Interview, Committee on Comprehensive Social Management, 10 August 2018.

77 "Wo shenbian de wanggeyuan [Grid patrolman alongside me]," Nanjing CCP, Politics and Law Committee, 25 June 2018, http://www.njzf.gov.cn/cxwghshzl/201806/t20180625_5469071.html; "Shuangpai wanggeyuan pingfan de yitian [Ordinary day for Shuangpai grid patrolmen]," *Sanxiang Management Network,* 16 April 2018, http://www.sxzzw.gov.cn/news/201804/16_170732_4196.html

78 Also called the "peace of the prison-yard." Judt 2005; Sullivan 2015; Schelling 1960.

79 "Wo shenbian de wanggehua [Grid patrolman alongside me]," Nanjing CCP Politics and Law Committee, 4 June 2018, http://www.njzf.gov.cn/cxwghshzl/201806/t20180604_5416204.html

80 Chen 2020; Liao and Tsai 2018; Deng and O'Brien 2013; "Wo shenbian de wanggeyuan [Grid patrolman alongside me]," Nanjing CCP, Politics and Law Committee, 25 June 2018, http://www.njzf.gov.cn/cxwghshzl/201806/t20180625_5469001.html

81 Lee and Zhang 2013; Benney 2016.

82 Interview, township police officer, 20 December 2015.

83 "Weixian! Fuhai Jiedao yi nanzi zai loudao nei guyi dakai meiqi ping famen houli qu," *Shenzhen News Network,* 23 March 2019, http://www.sznews.com/news/content/2019-03/23/content_21497558.htm; "Wanggeyuan yanzhong de hanjiang wanggehua zhili fuwu moshi," *Fujian Fazhi Baoshe* (Fujian CCP

Political-Legal Committee), 6 July 2016, http://www.pafj.net/html/2016/toutiao_0706/56954.html; "Xixiang wanggeyuan yi ri lianzhu jingfang zhuahao 2 ming diaoqie diandongche xianfan," *Nanfang Dushibao,* 26 October 2018, http://epaper.oeeee.com/epaper/H/html/2018-10/26/content_55063.htm

[84] Liao and Tsai 2018; Li et al 2012; "Wanggeyuan yanzhong de hanjiang wanggehua zhili fuwu moshi," *Fujian Fazhi Baoshe* (Fujian CCP Political-Legal Committee), 6 July 2016, http://www.pafj.net/html/2016/toutiao_0706/56954.html

[85] Dong 2015.

[86] M District 2009.

[87] On individuation and privacy, see Roberts 2018; Pan 2020. Collective experience of repression can solidify out-group identity and harden resistance; see Francisco 2005; Siegel 2011; Blaydes 2018.

[88] M District, *Report on GCP Achievements,* 2012.

[89] Population/housing information are considered foundations of "infrastructural information." See also Batke and Ohlberg 2020.

[90] M District, *Grid Management Annual Data Report,* 2016; M District, *Grid Management Annual Data Report,* 2019.

[91] M District, *Report on the GCP,* 2012.

[92] Gao 2015; Pan and Chen 2018; Wallace 2014.

[93] Municipal Government, Policy Document, 2014.

[94] Municipal Government, *Five-year Social Management Plan,* 2017.

[95] CCP Central Committee/PRC State Council, "Guanyu jiaqiang he wanshan chengxiang shequ zhili de yijian [Suggestions to Enhance/Improve Social Management in Urban and Rural Communities]," 12 June 2017. See also Tang 2019; Xi Jinping, 19th Party Congress report, 18 October 2017.

[96] See also Scoggins and O'Brien 2016.

[97] Interview, district officer, Office of Comprehensive Social Management, 5 July 2018.

[98] Interview, district director, Office of Comprehensive Social Management, 5 July 2018.

[99] Shai Oster, "China Tries its Hand at Pre-Crime," *Bloomberg*, 3 March 2016, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-03-03/china-tries-its-hand-at-pre-crime; "Xi Jinping yanli de 'diyi ziyuan' weihe ruci zhongyao[Why is Xi Jinping's 'First Resource' so important?]," *Renminwang*[*People*], July 18, 2018, http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2018/0718/c1001-30155931.html.

[100] Interview, township GCP Center director, 15 June 2015.

[101] Interview, district GCP Center director, 4 July 2018. Reluctant departments can leverage ambiguous regulations and overlapping responsibilities to shirk duties, using loopholes and "abstaining from acts according to law" (*yifa bu zuowei*). Interview, district Office of Comprehensive Social Management director, 5 July 2018.

[102] Interview, district GCP center director, 4 July 2018. "Top-level institutional design" was first used in 2010; Xi has used it to refer to a systematic, unitary, coordinated plan for reform, revising Deng's "crossing the river by touching the stones."

[103] Greitens 2016.

[104] For examples of this, see Read 2012; Koss 2018; Mattingly 2019. On the importance of single-party rule for policy diffusion, see Beissinger 2007; Goldring and Greitens 2019.

[105] Greitens 2020; see also Koh Hong-Eng, "How video cameras can make cities safer," *South China Morning Post,* 3 June 2018, https://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/2148860/big-brother-surveillance-how-video-cameras-can-make-cities

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