Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice

ISSN: 1387-6988 (Print) 1572-5448 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/fcpa20

From Buck-Passing to Rapid Response: A Comparative Study of Beijing's Complaint Handling Before and After *Jiesu Jiban* Reform

Wenzhao Li, Huangfeng Zeng & Wei Liu

To cite this article: Wenzhao Li, Huangfeng Zeng & Wei Liu (23 Feb 2026): From Buck-Passing to Rapid Response: A Comparative Study of Beijing's Complaint Handling Before and After *Jiesu Jiban* Reform, Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice, DOI: 10.1080/13876988.2026.2617261

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13876988.2026.2617261

Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis, 2026
Vol. 00, No. 00, 1–21, https://doi.org/10.1080/13876988.2026.2617261

From Buck-Passing to Rapid Response: A Comparative Study of Beijing's Complaint Handling Before and After *Jiesu Jiban* Reform

WENZHAO LI [*,**], HUANGFENG ZENG [*], & WEI LIU [*,†]
*School of Public Administration and Policy, Renmin University of China, Beijing, China, **Chinese Institute for Public Governance Research, Beijing, China, †China Institute for Philanthropy and Social Innovation, Renmin University of China, Beijing, China

(Received 20 June 2025; Accepted 10 January 2026)

ABSTRACT This study examines Beijing's *Jiesu Jiban* reform to explain how centralized governance overcomes bureaucratic inertia. While existing literature often focuses on fragmentation, the article reframes this as a principal–agent problem under high monitoring costs. It identifies a sequenced causal logic where political embeddedness activates a regime of performance discipline enabled by algorithmic verification. This interaction drastically reduces the cost of verification, reconfiguring *tiao–kuai* relations from agency failure (buck-passing) to monitored cooperation. By conceptualizing digital platforms as "political technologies" – instruments designed to eliminate information asymmetry – this study reveals how data-driven responsiveness is strategically repurposed to enforce political compliance in developing contexts.

Keywords: comparative process tracing; local government; urban; digital governance; principal–agent problem

Wenzhao Li is a professor at the School of Public Administration and Policy, Renmin University of China. His research focuses on policy process theories, mainly policy evaluation and punctuated equilibrium. He also studies urban governance in China, with a focus on the rapid response to public complaints. His research findings have been published in the *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, Public Performance & Management Review* and other journals.
Huangfeng Zeng is a PhD student at the School of Public Administration and Policy, Renmin University of China. His research focuses on the use of artificial intelligence in public sectors, environmental governance, and the general theories of public administration.
Wei Liu is a professor at the School of Public Administration and Policy, Renmin University of China. Her main research interests focus on the policy process, with an emphasis on the dynamic mechanisms of policy formulation and implementation, as well as China's political system and its practical operation in governance practice.
Correspondence Address: Wei Liu, School of Public Administration and Policy, Renmin University of China, Beijing, China. Email: lw@ruc.edu.cn

1. Introduction

In the summer of 2017, a resident of F District in Beijing dialed the municipal 12345 hotline repeatedly to report a blocked storm drain outside her building. Despite multiple calls over two weeks, no maintenance teams arrived; only after her complaint went viral on social media did the local street office scramble to clear the obstruction and issue a public apology. Similar stories abounded in the years that followed. In C District, a persistent pothole on a busy commuter route remained unfixed for months as the Housing Management Bureau, Urban Management Bureau, and street office each deferred responsibility to one another.

This "buck-passing equilibrium" illustrated a classic problem of agency failure in local governance. In a vast bureaucratic hierarchy, the "principal" (the municipal leadership) faced prohibitively high monitoring costs, creating a structural environment where "agents" (local bureaus and street offices) could safely shirk their duties. As noted in development economics literature, when top-down monitoring is costly or physically difficult, local agents rationally exploit these blind spots to minimize effort, knowing that verification by the center is unlikely (Olken 2007; Ferraz and Finan 2008; Olken and Pande 2012).

By contrast, in the spring of 2020, the same 12345 hotline seemed transformed. Within hours of a resident's report of leaking sewage in X District, an AI-driven dispatch platform identified the responsible agencies, flagged the case as "multi-agency", and delivered it directly to the street office and local water authority. A rapid-response team assembled within an hour, cordoned off the hazard, and coordinated pipe replacement – all within half a day. Citizen satisfaction rates climbed, resolution times fell from weeks to days, and public confidence in local governance visibly improved.

Despite the absence of major structural reorganization, these contrasting vignettes raise a central puzzle relevant to many developing contexts: How can a centralized government, typically plagued by limited resources and severe information asymmetry, effectively monitor and discipline a vast, evasive bureaucracy? Why did Beijing's administrative system evolve so dramatically from a state of unmonitored paralysis to one of coordinated agility?

This study examines the 2019 *Jiesu Jiban* (Swift Response to Public Complaints) reform, a citywide initiative anchored in the 12345 citizen hotline, to explain this transformation. This article argues that the shift was driven not by technology alone, but by a sequenced political logic designed to solve the principal–agent problem. We posit that political embeddedness – the elevation of grievance-handling to a non-negotiable Communist Party of China (CPC) mandate – served as the driver. This will was then operationalized through a regime of performance discipline, powered by AI-driven metrics and real-time dashboards.

The interaction of these forces resulted in the institutional outcome of *tiao–kuai* reconfiguration. In developing this argument, we conceptualize digital platforms not as neutral "efficiency enhancers" that simply reduce administrative friction, but as political technologies. We define "political technologies" as instruments deployed to solve core political problems – specifically, mitigating agency loss by using citizen grievances as a low-cost, high-fidelity signal to monitor local officials (Chen et al. 2016; Wang et al. 2025). This study contributes to comparative public administration by demonstrating how a centralized state can harness digital tools to mitigate

agency failure, constructing a low-cost monitoring regime that overcomes information asymmetry to enforce political compliance across a vast hierarchy.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature on political agency and monitoring, New Public Management (NPM), and data-driven governance, identifying the gap our study fills. Section 3 details our theoretical framework and the hierarchical relationship between our mechanisms. Section 4 outlines our comparative process-tracing methodology. Section 5 presents the empirical case study, contrasting the pre- and post-reform dynamics. Section 6 discusses the findings, addresses the reform's tensions, and explores its broader implications.

2. Literature Review: Fragmentation, NPM, and Data-Driven Governance

Our study is situated at the intersection of three bodies of literature: political agency and monitoring, NPM, and digital governance.

First, the challenge of local governance in centralized states is fundamentally a problem of political agency and monitoring costs under resource constraints. In a principal-agent framework, the central government (the principal) delegates authority to local bureaucracies (the agents) to implement policies, but faces severe information asymmetries regarding local conditions and official effort (Mitnick 1975; Holmstrom 1979). In developing countries, where the resources for centralized oversight are limited, this asymmetry creates a breeding ground for bureaucratic shirking. When monitoring is costly or imperfect, agents rationally "shirk" or displace effort away from unmeasured tasks – such as resolving complex, low-visibility citizen grievances – to focus on easily measurable targets like GDP growth (Holmstrom and Milgrom 1991; Li and Zhou 2005; Besley et al. 2022).

This agency problem explains the phenomenon of "buck-passing" not merely as a structural byproduct of bureaucratic complexity, but as a rational response to high monitoring costs. Traditional "police patrol" oversight – centralized, active surveillance – is often prohibitively expensive for checking millions of routine administrative tasks (McCubbins and Schwartz 1984). Consequently, local officials operate in a "zone of indifference" where inaction on specific grievances carries little risk of detection. While "fire alarm" mechanisms – such as citizen complaints – theoretically offer a lower-cost monitoring alternative, in many developing contexts they suffer from a verification gap: without reliable data transmission and enforcement, citizen alarms are easily ignored or suppressed by local agents (Greenstone et al. 2022).

Therefore, the persistence of administrative inertia is best understood as a monitoring failure derived from the high cost of acquiring information in a vast hierarchy. The "buck-passing equilibrium" described in our case study persists because the principal lacks a low-cost technology to identify who is responsible and to verify whether a task has been completed. This perspective reframes the reform not as a structural reorganization of departments, but as the introduction of a technology designed to solve the principal-agent problem by drastically reducing the cost of monitoring and enforcement.

Second, the reform's reliance on quantification and performance metrics evokes clear parallels with NPM, but with a distinct logic adapted to the agency problems described above. While classic NPM emphasizes decentralization and managerial autonomy

(Hood 1991; Osborne and Gaebler 1992), scholars have noted that in strong-state contexts, these tools are often repurposed for "compliance enforcement" (Dunleavy and Hood 1994).

In the case of *Jiesu Jiban*, NPM-style mechanisms serve less to empower managers and more to mitigate agency failure. By tying performance data – such as response rates and citizen satisfaction – to cadre evaluations, the system converts managerial accountability into strict political compliance. This aligns with observations of "top-down managerialism", where performance targets function as high-powered incentives to overcome information asymmetry and align local agents with central mandates (Chen et al. 2024). In this sense, the reform blends the technical rationality of NPM with the political rationality of the principal's mandate, transforming managerial tools into low-cost verification mechanisms for centralized oversight.

Third, the reform represents a paradigmatic case of digital governance. While often likened to Western 311 systems for citizen service coordination, a more analytically useful comparison is to data-driven performance regimes such as *Compstat* in policing and *CitiStat* in municipal management (Henderson and Center 2003; Weisburd et al. 2003).

Superficially, *Jiesu Jiban* mirrors these Western models. Both rely on continuous data collection, granular performance metrics, and regular accountability sessions to identify problems and enforce responsiveness. Just as *Compstat* uses crime statistics to hold precinct commanders accountable, *Jiesu Jiban* tracks complaint resolution rates in real time. Through algorithmic dashboards and cross-bureau visibility, the platform converts dispersed administrative information into an omnipresent monitoring apparatus.

However, a deep structural divergence exists in their primary objective, which reflects the different agency problems they address. Western systems like *Compstat* are primarily *managerial* instruments: they are designed to enhance internal organizational learning and strategic optimization (Vito et al. 2017). Their purpose is to help agency heads identify inefficiencies, experiment with new strategies, and better allocate resources. The underlying assumption is that agents are generally aligned with organizational goals but lack the data to execute them effectively.

In contrast, *Jiesu Jiban* functions as an explicitly *political technology* designed to overcome a severe principal–agent disconnect. In the context of high monitoring costs described earlier, the central concern is not merely resource allocation but the enforcement of compliance against shirking. Consequently, the platform is deployed to solve a core political monitoring problem. It extends far beyond departmental management to encompass the entire municipal bureaucracy, embedding Party oversight into every layer of performance data.

This difference is most visible in the mechanisms of accountability. While *Compstat* meetings focus on solving the crime problem, *Jiesu Jiban* meetings – described by Beijing officials as "digital *gaokao*" (college entrance exam) sessions – focus on disciplining the cadre (agent). The platform's metrics are transformed into political signals tied to "shame rolls" and Party disciplinary systems. By making street-level inaction visible to municipal leaders in real time, the platform drastically reduces the cost of verification, eliminating the information asymmetry that previously allowed local agents to shirk responsibility.

This distinction fundamentally shapes the system's vulnerabilities. Managerial systems often suffer from "gaming", where agents prioritize measured metrics over substantive goals. As noted in the literature on target-driven governance, frontline personnel may engage in "strategic alienation" or redirect effort away from unmeasured tasks that fall outside the scope of formal assessment (Bevan and Hood 2006; Aboubichr and Conway 2023). The *Jiesu Jiban* system faces these same managerial frictions but with higher stakes. Because the system is designed to enforce strict compliance with political mandates through data, the pressure to "game" the metrics is intensified. However, unlike traditional bureaucracies where non-compliance is hard to detect, the digital infrastructure minimizes the "verification gap" by automating the detection of overdue cases. Our analysis thus extends digital governance scholarship by demonstrating how, in centralized states, digital platforms serve as infrastructural extensions of political authority – technologies that leverage data to enforce responsiveness at a scale and speed that manual monitoring could never achieve (Zuboff 2019).

3. Theoretical Framework

We propose that the transformation of Beijing's grievance-redress system hinges on a sequenced framework comprising one foundational driver, one technical enabler, and one institutional outcome. We argue that political embeddedness (Phase 1) establishes the principal's mandate, which activates a regime of performance discipline (Phase 2) enabled by algorithmic verification to enforce compliance. This sequenced pressure compels the *Tiao–Kuai* Reconfiguration (Phase 3), transforming agency failure into monitored cooperation.

3.1 The Foundation: Political Embeddedness (The Driver)

Political embeddedness constitutes the CPC's deliberate infusion of political imperatives into routine administrative processes, transforming tasks like complaint handling into politically charged mandates. Central to this is the principal's mandate, a strategic logic through which political leadership converts administrative matters into urgent tests of political compliance, thereby underpinning political embeddedness (Zhao 2016; Landry et al. 2018).

This strategic logic draws on the CPC's historical repertoire of campaign-style governance, in which short-term mobilizations override bureaucratic shirking and institutional inertia to enforce central priorities (Heilmann 2005; Liu et al. 2015). The *Jiesu Jiban* reform institutionalizes this campaign logic by embedding mobilization pressures within formal regulations, notably the 2021 Beijing Municipality *Jiesu Jiban* Work Regulations, thereby transforming temporary drives into enduring obligations.

In practice, this mandate reconfigures bureaucratic priorities. Beijing recast complaint resolution – once a routine administrative duty – as a "priority task" (中心工作) directly tied to Xi Jinping's call to address citizens' "urgent, difficult, and anxious concerns". Quantitative metrics such as the "Three Rates" (response speed, resolution rate, citizen satisfaction) were linked to cadre evaluations, while monthly rankings publicly rewarded top performers and shamed laggards (Wei et al. 2023). This process elevated

administrative performance into a litmus test of political adherence, blurring the line between governance efficiency and political obedience.

The effects are twofold. Politically, the system reinforces principal–agent alignment and compliance signaling by tying citizen satisfaction to cadre advancement. Administratively, it bolsters performance legitimacy by projecting responsiveness to citizen demands (Dickson 2014; Chen et al. 2016). Moreover, the high salience of Three Rates encourages anticipatory governance: officials preemptively address emerging issues – such as neighborhood disputes or environmental nuisances – to avoid the political costs of inaction (Habich-Sobiegalla et al. 2024).

Through these mechanisms, the principal's mandate embeds political authority into everyday bureaucratic practice. What begins as routine complaint handling becomes a politically charged performance of compliance, aligning administrative workflows continuously with regime objectives under the Party's "people-first" ethos. Failure to meet targets was no longer an administrative lapse but a potential political transgression, incentivizing cadres to transcend departmental silos and prioritize resolution.

3.2 The Core: Performance Discipline (The Enabling Mechanism)

We define this core mechanism as performance discipline. Central to this is algorithmic verification, which functions as a regime of low-cost digital monitoring. It converts high-level political mandates into an enforceable, real-time disciplinary mechanism by solving the information asymmetry that typically plagues principal–agent relationships.

This logic is built upon the foundational infrastructure of the digital platform itself – specifically, the AI-dispatch system, the unified 12345 hotline, and the real-time performance dashboards. This digital infrastructure is the critical enabling factor because political directives alone, no matter how stringent, suffer from high monitoring costs (Holmstrom and Milgrom 1991). In a traditional bureaucracy, the "principal" cannot verify the actions of every "agent" across millions of cases.

Technology solves this by making the political will scalable and verifiable. Scalability is achieved as the system uses AI to automatically categorize and dispatch a massive volume of citizen complaints, performing a monitoring task beyond the capacity of human inspectors. Verifiability is achieved as it translates messy, qualitative citizen grievances into standardized metrics (the Three Rates).

This quantification process constitutes an "algorithmic panopticon" (Woodcock 2020). Every citizen interaction is tracked, categorized, and evaluated. The Three Rates are not mere statistics; they are verified signals of agent effort displayed on real-time dashboards. This constant, high-visibility monitoring creates intense peer pressure, compelling local agencies to compete against Party-defined benchmarks.

This is precisely what distinguishes *Jiesu Jiban* as a political technology. A simple efficiency tool might help a street-level office sort complaints. In contrast, *Jiesu Jiban* is explicitly designed to eliminate the information asymmetry that local agents traditionally exploited to shirk responsibility (O'Brien and Li 1999). The principal (higher-level leadership) no longer needs to guess if the agent is performing its duty; the dashboard makes the agent's performance clearly visible. The system thus ensures that the street-level office must resolve the complaint – not just register it – or face

immediate political consequences. It is, in essence, a cost-reducing technology for centralized control.

3.3 The Outcome: Tiao–Kuai *Reconfiguration*

The *Tiao–Kuai* Reconfiguration is not a third, parallel mechanism but rather the crucial institutional outcome resulting from the intense, combined pressure of political embeddedness and performance discipline.

The reform did not succeed by dismantling China's deeply entrenched formal structures – the *tiao* (vertical bureaus) and *kuai* (horizontal street offices) were left intact. This is a critical point. The pre-reform system failed because these structures created "jurisdictional ambiguity" and "structural fragmentation", enabling the equilibrium of agency failure.

Instead of a formal restructuring, the reform achieved a functional reconfiguration. It overlaid a powerful, digital coordination layer on top of the existing fragmentation. This layer changes the rules of interaction between *tiao* and *kuai*. On the one hand, it eliminates ambiguity: The AI dispatch system, paired with the "first-contact responsibility" rule, precisely routes complex cases to the primary responsible sub-district office and relevant collaborating departments (instead of undifferentiated multi-agency dispatching). Legally and technologically, this locks in the collaborative guarantee for joint dispatching – shuttering the old loop of shirking, as no agency can shirk accountability by claiming the problem is "not my job". On the other hand, it creates shared fate: The shared "Three Rates" metrics mean that *tiao* and *kuai* are now bound together in a system of monitored cooperation. A bureau's (*tiao*) failure to cooperate directly harms the street office's (*kuai*) satisfaction score, and vice versa. Their performance, once siloed, is now visibly and algorithmically linked.

Agency failure, once a source of inertia, is thus transformed into a managed system of "monitored cooperation". Bureaucratic silos formally remain, but their ability to hinder action is neutered. The digital layer and political mandate compel the horizontal and vertical collaboration necessary for rapid responsiveness, effectively turning the old administrative liability into a new source of coordinated, adaptive governance.

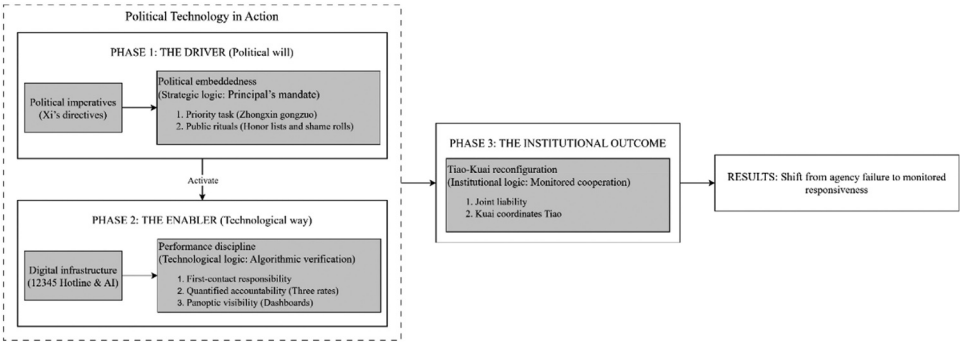
Figure 1 presents the theoretical diagram. This is not a linear sequence but a hierarchical, nested one.

4. Methodology

This study employs a comparative process-tracing approach to explain the institutional and behavioral transformation of Beijing's grievance-redress system. We systematically contrast two periods: the pre-reform phase (2017–2018), characterized by fragmentation, and the post-reform phase (2019–2022), defined by the *Jiesu Jiban* implementation.

We employ a process-tracing methodology for theory-building (George and Bennett 2005; Bennett and Checkel 2015). Rather than using the pre-/post-reform comparison to test a pre-formed hypothesis in a positivist vein, we focus on reconstructing the causal mechanisms that explain the observed change. This empirically grounded reconstruction

Figure 1. Theoretical diagram



Source: Authors' creation based on fieldwork data. Note: This figure illustrates the sequenced causal mechanism of the *Jiesu Jiban* reform. The process is initiated by Political Embeddedness (Phase 1), where high-level mandates are issued to generate political will. This will is then operationalized through Performance Discipline (Phase 2), enabled by digital infrastructure that drastically reduces monitoring costs and creates an "algorithmic panopticon". The interaction of political pressure and low-cost verification compels the *Tiao–Kuai* Reconfiguration (Phase 3). This institutional outcome transforms the pre-reform dynamics of agency failure (buck-passing) into a new logic of "monitored cooperation", producing the observed shift to rapid responsiveness.

informs our theoretical framework of political embeddedness, performance discipline, and institutional reconfiguration.

Our primary data comes from three interlocking sources, triangulated to ensure validity. First, we conducted 42 semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders. These included municipal and district-level officials, bureau heads and chiefs (e.g., Urban Management, Environmental Protection), street-office directors, and managers at the 12345 hotline call center. We used a purposive and snowball sampling strategy to identify officials with direct knowledge of and responsibility for the *Jiesu Jiban* system.

Second, we carried out over 60 hours of participant observation between 2018 and 2022. This immersion allowed us to witness firsthand the coordination practices and the evolving role of AI-driven dispatch. We attended routine "noon meetings" in street offices, district-level accountability workshops, and 12345 call-center operations. Our site selection, as detailed in Appendix A, was designed to capture variation, including street offices with high, medium, and low performance rankings.

Third, we undertook a hermeneutic analysis of official documents, internal memoranda, and monthly performance bulletins. Key texts included the 2018 pilot guidelines, the 2021 Beijing Municipality *Jiesu Jiban* Work Regulation, and aggregated Three Rates statistics.

Consistent with methodological best practices, we attended to data saturation (Glaser and Strauss 2017). We continued interviews, particularly with street-office directors, until we reached a point of theoretical saturation. By our 30th interview with frontline officials, we found that new interviews yielded redundant descriptions of the core mechanisms. The terms "digital gaokao", "shame roll", and the intense pressure of the

"Three Rates" were consistently and universally described, signaling that we had captured the dominant logic of the system.

Data analysis was guided by a thematic codebook. We began with deductive codes from our theoretical framework (e.g., "political embeddedness", "*tiao–kuai* fragmentation") and added inductive codes that emerged directly from the data (e.g., "first-contact responsibility", "performative compliance"). This iterative process allowed us to refine our mechanisms.

To ensure reliability, we triangulated findings across all three data sources, cross-checking self-reported changes from interviews against observed practices and official statistics. Appendix A provides a detailed breakdown of our methodological procedures, including site access, interviewee selection, and a sample of our codebook structure, in line with standard expectations for methodological transparency.

5. Empirical Analysis: Tracing the *Jiesu Jiban* Reform

To understand the reform's mechanisms, we adopt a comparative process-tracing approach. We first establish the pre-reform baseline in Section 5.1, then trace the implementation of the two core mechanisms (political embeddedness and performance discipline) in Sections 5.2 and 5.3 respectively, and finally, we analyze the institutional outcome of *Tiao–Kuai* Reconfiguration in Section 5.4.

5.1 The Pre-Reform Baseline: The "Buck-Passing Equilibrium" (2017–2018)

Prior to 2019, Beijing's grievance-handling system was characterized by jurisdictional ambiguity and bureaucratic inertia. The 2017 F District drainage problem, mentioned in the introduction, was emblematic. A resident repeatedly phoned the 12345 hotline about a blocked storm drain flooding her community. For over two weeks, neither the Urban Management Bureau (*tiao*) nor the local township (*kuai*) took responsibility, each arguing it fell under the other's jurisdiction. Frustrated, she posted her story on Weibo, and only the resulting public shaming spurred a belated clean-up.

This episode laid bare two chronic pathologies of the pre-reform system: jurisdictional ambiguity and bureaucratic inertia. Vertical bureaus (*tiao*) and territorial street offices (*kuai*) existed in a delicate, unspoken buck-passing equilibrium, where each entity feared taking the first step in case the root cause lay elsewhere. As a result, simple maintenance tasks could languish for weeks or months, and residents learned that only public shaming – through social media or higher-level intervention – would spur action.

C District's infamous pothole saga further illustrates this inertia. In mid-2018, commuters on a major artery encountered a deep sinkhole that grew worse with each passing rainstorm. When residents called the 12345 hotline, operators logged the complaint but directed it sequentially: first to the Urban Management Bureau, then to the street office, and finally to the Traffic Police. None assumed immediate ownership, and the hole remained unrepaired for nearly two months. Each agency insisted the other was responsible, while frontline cadres deprioritized these trivial petitions. The result was public frustration and eroding trust in local governance.

This "buck-passing equilibrium" was not merely bureaucratic laziness; it was a rational survival strategy for frontline officials operating in a high-monitoring-cost

environment. Under this fragmented structure, jurisdictional ambiguity created severe information asymmetry, meaning that any voluntary intervention in a complex case could be interpreted as accepting responsibility. This was a high-risk, low-reward move for a *kuai* (street office) official, given that the principal (municipal leadership) lacked a low-cost and effective mechanism to verify who was truly responsible. As one street-level official explained, illustrating the logic of shirking under opacity: "Before [the reform], you were most afraid of taking on a job that wasn't yours … So, the best way was to prove it wasn't your job" (Interview, Street-Level Official, May 2020). Therefore, the pre-reform system incentivized a deep-seated culture of "blame avoidance" – or in agency terms, rational shirking – where the primary task was not to solve the problem, but to exploit the verification gap to shift liability to another department.

Technologically, this rational inertia was reinforced by the high cost of acquiring information. The system relied on rudimentary complaint channels – different telephone hotlines and paper petitions – that kept data siloed and prevented the principal from observing agent effort. Data was hoarded by individual bureaus anxious to conceal low performance rates, creating blind spots that shielded them from centralized oversight. Furthermore, consistent with multi-task agency theory (Holmstrom and Milgrom 1991), performance evaluations focused on high-visibility economic and stability targets, leaving routine complaint resolution unmonitored and invisible in bureaucratic scorecards. As one subdistrict official put it, "We treated the hotline as background noise; only when a case made headlines did we act. Otherwise, it stayed on our desk until someone at the top asked about it" (Interview, May 2020). This quote vividly illustrates the "zone of indifference" that persists when monitoring mechanisms rely on sporadic "fire alarms" rather than systematic verification.

5.2 The Driver: Political Embeddedness Through the Principal's Mandate

The *Jiesu Jiban* reform, initiated in 2019, fundamentally broke the pre-reform equilibrium by injecting massive political-level urgency into the administrative system. This political embeddedness was achieved through what we term "the principal's mandate" – recasting routine complaint resolution from a discretionary administrative task into a non-negotiable political imperative. This process unfolded through a multi-pronged, top-down mobilization campaign.

First, the reform was framed as a paramount political mandate. Building on a 2018 pilot program titled "Street and Township Whistleblowing, Department Dispatch", the Beijing Municipal Party Committee invoked Xi Jinping's 2017 exhortation to address citizens' "urgent, difficult, and anxious concerns". Rapid complaint resolution was elevated to a "priority task" and explicitly linked to Xi's broader "people-centered" governance agenda and the goal of "modernizing China's governance capacity". Every district secretary and bureau chief was explicitly informed that the "Three Rates" would be integral to their performance evaluations. This embedding of complaint-handling into the Party's "people-first" narrative transformed it into a litmus test of political fealty.

Second, this mandate was operationalized through a system of public performance rituals. Beijing began publishing monthly rankings of all government bureaus and street offices on internal platforms. These rankings became "honor lists" (红榜) for top performers and "shame rolls" (黑榜) for laggards. These real-time rankings became

a visible spectacle, signaling to officials that poor performance could jeopardize their standing. As one bureau chief tellingly observed, "Being placed on the shame roll for low satisfaction wasn't merely humiliation; it was a political failure. We understood that citizen contentment was now a direct measure of our loyalty" (Interview, November 2021).

Third, this intense political pressure cascaded down, reshaping daily routines from the district to the grassroots level. District Party committees convened weekly "accountability workshops", where bureau heads and subdistrict cadres gathered to dissect the "Three Rates". A Bureau of Urban Management chief from H District recalled, "These sessions became political accountability clinics … Everyone knew that a single unresolved pothole … could be used as evidence of failure in the next plenary meeting" (Interview, September 2021).

This pressure forced a shift from reactive to proactive governance. For example, in anticipation of a seasonal rise in noise and air-conditioner drains complaints during the summer of 2019, C District's Urban Management and Law Enforcement Bureau formed a joint task force in June. They preemptively inspected residential compounds for problematic air-conditioner drains and unauthorized water fixtures. A street office official explained the new logic: "Before *Jiesu Jiban*, if a resident called about noise, we sent someone to investigate. Now we search ahead of time. We send teams out in June, so the hotline has fewer noise calls in July" (Interview, August 2021). At the grassroots, *Jiesu Jiban* reshaped daily routines in street offices, with many Party committees designating specific cadres for "daily summons" to monitor complaints. Neighborhoods displayed banners proclaiming "The Party Leads at the Frontline" and "Citizen Concerns, Party Responses". As one community Party secretary described her new role: "When we find a problem, we don't wait for the hotline call – we report it ourselves and make sure it gets attention. That is the new spirit of *Jiesu Jiban*" (Interview, May 2024).

Finally, to sustain this campaign-style urgency, the city institutionalized the mandate through both legal and organizational mechanisms. Legally, on September 24, 2021, the Beijing Municipal People's Congress enacted the Beijing Municipality *Jiesu Jiban* Work Regulation. This regulation legally codified the "Three Rates", the seven-day resolution deadlines for most general issues, and the mandatory integration of AI and big data. Crucially, it reaffirmed "Party leadership as its linchpin", ensuring the political mandate would outlast the initial mobilization campaign. Organizationally, the mandate was used to directly overcome *tiao–kuai* fragmentation. District Party secretaries chaired special *Jiesu Jiban* leading groups, convening heads of all relevant sanitation, construction, and public security departments to coordinate high-priority cases. Digital dashboards ensured compliance: if a bureau missed a deadline, "push-back notifications" automatically alerted district or municipal leaders, serving as powerful reminders that compliance was mandatory.

In sum, through the principal's mandate – elevating complaint resolution as a "priority task", staging public performance rituals, forcing proactive governance, and embedding rapid handling into formal regulations – the Party overcame the opacity of the hierarchy, harnessing digital verification mechanisms to eliminate information asymmetry and enforce strict compliance in real time.

5.3 The Mechanism: Performance Discipline Through Algorithmic Verification

If political embeddedness was the will, performance discipline was the way. The Municipal Bureau of Government Services and Data Management was reconfigured from a simple service portal into the technological backbone and nerve center of enforcement. This section explains how this system disciplines the bureaucracy. The pre-reform system failed because bureaucratic performance on "trivial" complaints was invisible, unmeasured, and without consequence. The *Jiesu Jiban* reform succeeds by creating a closed disciplinary loop that makes performance visible, measurable, and consequential, thereby centralizing bureaucratic behavior around a single goal: rapid, satisfactory resolution.

This loop has four distinct stages. First, algorithmic assignment. The AI-driven dispatch platform acts as the system's disciplinarian. Its primary function is to eliminate the "jurisdictional ambiguity" that enabled shirking. When a complex "hot potato" case arrives, the AI system parses the keywords and algorithmically assigns the work order. This is not a "request" that a bureaucrat can debate; it is an inescapable assignment. The algorithm, as an impartial and non-negotiable authority, affixes responsibility, stripping bureaucrats of their primary defense: "It's not my job."

Second, quantified accountability. The moment the algorithm assigns the work order, the clock starts. The ticket is instantly and unbreakably linked to the "Three Rates". This step is critical: it translates the task (the work order) into a personal performance metric (the rates). The abstract political will is thus converted into a concrete, quantified, and high-stakes performance indicator for the individual bureaucrat.

Third, panoptic visibility. This personal metric is then made public through an "algorithmic panopticon" (Woodcock 2020). Real-time dashboards, visible to leaders at every level, display each (sub)district's and bureau's "Three Rates". This is the "digital *gaokao*" that an official described (Interview, June 2023). It transforms private bureaucratic work into a public performance. Every unresolved complaint is a visible red mark on the dashboard, a source of constant peer pressure and hierarchical scrutiny.

Finally, ritualized discipline. This data is not passive; it is activated in the weekly "accountability workshops" as actionable evidence. Here, superiors use the verified data to apply formal discipline. The Three Rate score is projected for all to see. Leaders use the "honor lists" to signal alignment and, more importantly, the "shame rolls" to sanction shirking. Being publicly named on a "shame roll" imposes a severe reputational cost; it is, as one bureau chief stated, a "political failure" (Interview, November 2021). This ritual serves as the final enforcement mechanism, generating intense anticipatory compliance.

Together, this four-stage loop – algorithmic assignment, quantified accountability, panoptic visibility, and ritualized discipline – effectively binds the bureaucrat. It eliminates the information asymmetry that permitted shirking and produces high-powered incentives to adhere to the command embedded in the work order. As the official from D District noted, the system created "immense stress, but also clarity … and … leverage" (Interview, November 2023). The stress arises from inescapable monitoring; the leverage emerges from systemic transparency. Because this regime disciplines all actors simultaneously, an official can now utilize the shared threat of verification to enforce the cooperation of other departments – the mechanism we turn to next.

5.4 The Outcome: Tiao–Kuai *Reconfiguration in Action*

This brings us to the reform's primary institutional outcome. The system did not dissolve the *tiao* (vertical) or *kuai* (horizontal) structures. Instead, the intense pressure from political embeddedness and performance discipline reconfigured their relationship from one of competitive rivalry to one of monitored cooperation. The case of an unauthorized construction project in X District in June 2019, which we traced through field observations and interviews, provides a clear process-traced example.

Step 1: The complaint.

A resident in X District used the 12345 mobile app to report an unauthorized, multi-story structure being built in a narrow hutong (alley), blocking light and creating a fire hazard. The citizen uploaded photos, which were immediately attached to the case file.

Step 2: Pre-reform (hypothetical).

In the pre-reform system, this case would have been a classic "buck-passing" nightmare – a clear manifestation of agency failure enabled by high verification costs. The street office (*kuai*) would have inspected the site and claimed it lacked law enforcement authority to stop construction. They would have forwarded the complaint to the Urban Management Bureau (*tiao*), which would argue it was a zoning issue for the Planning Bureau (*tiao*). The Planning Bureau would state it was an enforcement issue for Urban Management. The case would have languished for months as the structure was completed.

Step 3: Post-reform (actual AI dispatch).

Under *Jiesu Jiban*, the resident's report was processed by AI. The system parsed the keywords "unauthorized construction", "zoning", and "hazard", immediately identifying the case as a "complex multi-agency matter". Within minutes, the work order was dispatched to the terminals of three entities: the local street office (*kuai*, the first contact), the District Urban Management Bureau (*tiao*), and the District Planning Bureau (*tiao*). The street office was algorithmically designated the "first-contact agent", making it the lead coordinator. For the street director, this was an immediate call to action; for the bureaus, it was an "algorithmic summons" that eliminated jurisdictional ambiguity. They could not ignore this verified assignment.

Step 4: Creating "shared fate" through joint liability.

Critically, the reform's mechanisms – the seven-day deadline and the Three Rates – are not just individual metrics; they are shared. The single unauthorized construction case appears on the performance dashboards of all three implicated units. This creates an algorithmically monitored "shared fate" and a new logic of monitored cooperation. Under the "first-contact responsibility" rule, the street office (*kuai*) is designated the primary coordinator, but the collaborating departments (*tiao*) now bear joint liability. The incentive structure is explicit: if the Planning Bureau shirks its duty to provide zoning documents, it directly hinders the Urban Management Bureau's enforcement. This cascading failure causes the street office to miss the deadline, which in turn triggers a negative mark on the Three Rates for all three units.

Step 5: Reversing the power dynamic.

This incentive structure fundamentally alters the *tiao–kuai* power dynamic, a shift we directly observed in district-level "accountability workshops". These weekly meetings are not routine; they are high-stakes performance rituals. In one such observation, a street office director (*kuai*) used this exact mechanism to break a similar stalemate. He projected the live dashboard onto the main screen for the entire district leadership to see. Pointing to a flashing red case file, he publicly addressed a bureau chief (*tiao*):

> Director X, we are both on this ticket. My residents are complaining daily. Because your bureau has not issued the inspection report for three days, my Three Rates are dropping, and this case is now escalated. The District Secretary will see this on the municipal shame roll by next week. (Field Notes, Accountability Workshop, 2021)

This use of public, data-driven shaming as political leverage was, as another official noted, "unthinkable" before the reform. The collaborating *tiao* departments are no longer unmonitored actors that can ignore the *kuai*'s requests. They are now algorithmically bound to respond to the "whistle" blown by the street office. The system empowers the *kuai* with a potent escalation pathway: should a bureau remain non-compliant, the street office can leverage the visible non-compliance on the dashboard to request intervention from the district government. The visibility of non-compliance creates a credible threat of sanction, making cooperation the only rational choice.

This sequence – from AI dispatch to shared fate and, finally, to a reconfigured power dynamic – is the institutional outcome of the reform in action, effectively replacing the logic of fragmentation with the logic of monitored cooperation. The anecdotal evidence is supported by a dramatic shift in quantitative metrics. By the end of 2022, Beijing's overall complaint resolution rate had soared to 97 per cent, and average resolution times plummeted from over 20 days to fewer than 5.

Most telling for our *tiao–kuai* reconfiguration thesis is the change in joint case handling. According to municipal data, the percentage of complaints requiring multi-agency action that were successfully resolved through joint handling rose from 42 per cent in 2017 to 78 per cent in 2022. The system was now designed to thrive on the very complexity that used to paralyze it. As one longtime D District resident remarked in July 2022, "Now, when we call 12345, it's as if someone flips a switch. The street office, the sanitation bureau, even the police show up within hours. It's nothing like before, when calls disappeared into a bureaucratic black hole" (Interview, July 2022).

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Our comparative analysis demonstrates that Beijing's *Jiesu Jiban* reform represents a fundamental reconfiguration of the principal–agent relationship in local governance. The sequenced logic of political embeddedness (the Party's mandate) activating performance discipline (the algorithmic regime) successfully solved the classic problem of agency failure inherent in the *tiao–kuai* matrix. This process transformed the system from a state of agency failure – sustained by high monitoring costs – to a state of "monitored responsiveness".

This transformation cannot be attributed to technology alone. Rather, *Jiesu Jiban* succeeded because the CPC politically embedded grievance handling within its core

governance priorities, turning routine administrative work into a direct test of cadre loyalty. Algorithmic monitoring then operationalized this political mandate by drastically reducing the cost of verification, making performance – or the lack thereof – visible, consequential, and inescapable. However, the reform's success has also generated significant tensions and revealed clear limitations.

6.1 Tensions and Limitations of Hyper-Responsiveness

First, the intense focus on rapid resolution has placed immense pressure on frontline workers, generating significant "accountability costs" (Habich-Sobiegalla et al. 2024). The pre-reform system, while inefficient, offered a buffer; street-level officials could deprioritize trivial complaints to manage their workload. Post-reform, the "digital *gaokao*" eliminates this discretion. Every complaint, no matter how minor, becomes an urgent priority. Recent studies on Beijing's social workers confirm that while digital monitoring increases "work effort", it disproportionately escalates stress and reduces intrinsic engagement (Ouyang et al. 2025). This model's long-term sustainability is contingent on a frontline bureaucracy that can withstand constant, high-stakes performance monitoring without collapsing under the load.

Second, this algorithmic performance discipline incentivizes strategic gaming. As predicted by multi-task agency theory, when agents are judged on narrow quantitative metrics (speed and satisfaction), they may engage in performative compliance – opting for quick fixes that close a case file within the seven-day limit but fail to address the root cause (Xiao and Zhu 2022). This phenomenon mirrors the trajectory of other NPM-style reforms in China, where rigid performance targets eventually led to "goal displacement" and the deterioration of service quality over time (Chen et al. 2024). This suggests that while the system effectively reduces shirking, it risks displacing effort toward superficial compliance.

Third, and most critically, the reform's limitations were starkly revealed by a systemic stress test: the COVID-19 pandemic. The *Jiesu Jiban* system was optimized to solve routine administrative problems (e.g., potholes, noise). However, the fall 2022 crisis flooded the hotline with systemic grievances – temporary lockdowns and medical access – that exceeded the capacity of street-level agents to resolve. As behavioral science research during the pandemic has noted, effective crisis response requires trust and adaptive cooperation, which can be brittle in systems overly reliant on rigid, top-down command (Ruggeri et al. 2024). This highlights the boundary conditions of the model: it is a tool for administrative compliance, hardly a substitute for systemic crisis management.

6.2 Implications and Transferability

Beijing's experience offers important policy implications for the digital transformation of government in other developing contexts. The technological components – AI dispatch and real-time dashboards – are highly transferable. However, our analysis suggests that the model's success is contingent on solving the monitoring cost dilemma.

Scholars have noted that if a central government could monitor local agents at no cost, complex mechanisms like *Jiesu Jiban* would be unnecessary (Agrawal et al. 2024). The innovation of this model is precisely that it approximates costless monitoring. By

crowdsourcing "fire alarms" from citizens and using AI to automatically verify and route them, the system bypasses the prohibitive costs of traditional "police patrol" oversight (McCubbins and Schwartz 1984).

However, lowering the discovery cost is only half the equation. The system's success in other regions will depend on the political will to act on that information. In a city with less centralized political authority, or where leaders prioritize other goals over grievance redressal, the same technology would likely fail (Perry 2024). Without the "political embeddedness" to enforce sanctions, the information generated by the dashboard would simply be ignored. Thus, we hypothesize that in regions with weaker political control, the introduction of this technology without the corresponding political discipline would not lead to responsiveness, but rather to sophisticated gaming and superficial compliance.

6.3 Concluding Remarks

Beijing's *Jiesu Jiban* reform exemplifies a new paradigm of data-driven governance. By treating digital platforms as "political technologies", the CPC did not just improve service delivery; it solved a core principal–agent problem. It converted a fragmented, opaque bureaucracy into a transparent, monitored network, demonstrating how centralized states can harness digital tools to overcome the information asymmetries that traditionally plague policy implementation.

Crucially, this governance model is not static. While it successfully solves the agency problem by lowering monitoring costs, Beijing is actively refining the system to address the resultant pressures on frontline agents. The reform is entering a new phase of adaptive learning, seeking to internalize these capacity constraints – creating feedback loops that balance algorithmic rigor with administrative sustainability. Thus, *Jiesu Jiban* is evolving from a blunt disciplinary tool into a resilient governance mechanism capable of self-correction. Future research should track this adaptive trajectory, examining how centralized states optimize digital systems to be not only responsive but also enduring.

Acknowledgements

Since all authors are non-native English speakers, we have used ChatGPT to polish the language, and the adoption was closely supervised by the authors throughout the process, who take full responsibility for all of the content.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This research is supported by China's National Natural Science Foundation [72174199].

ORCID

Wenzhao Li http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0571-1261
Huangfeng Zeng http://orcid.org/0009-0007-0558-3101
Wei Liu http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8746-6476

References

Aboubichr, B. and Conway, N., 2023, The gaming of performance management systems in British Universities. *Human Relations*, **76**(4), pp. 602–628. doi:10.1177/00187267211052827

Agrawal, D. R., Brueckner, J. K., and Brülhart, M., 2024, Fiscal federalism in the twenty-first century. *Annual Review of Economics*, **16**(1), pp. 429–454. doi:10.1146/annurev-economics-081623-020713

Bennett, A. and Checkel, J. T., 2015, *Process Tracing* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press). https://books.google.com/books?hl=zh-CN&lr=&id=pYkaBQAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PR7&dq=%22process+tracing%22+method&ots=Ic8C2Pu4eZ&sig=JLyspl7eBugCG3r62f2pjKWKUMQ

Besley, T., Burgess, R., Khan, A., and Xu, G., 2022, Bureaucracy and development. *Annual Review of Economics*, **14**(1), pp. 397–424. doi:10.1146/annurev-economics-080521-011950

Bevan, G. and Hood, C., 2006, What's measured is what matters: Targets and gaming in the English public health care system. *Public Administration*, **84**(3), pp. 517–538. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9299.2006.00600.x

Chen, C., Chen, B., and Mitchell, G. E., 2024, The rise and fall of an NPM-style reform in China: A longitudinal case study of sanitation service delivery in Guangzhou. *Public Management Review*, **26**(9), pp. 2586–2610. doi:10.1080/14719037.2023.2260819

Chen, J., Pan, J., and Xu, Y., 2016, Sources of authoritarian responsiveness: A field experiment in China. *American Journal of Political Science*, **60**(2), pp. 383–400. doi:10.1111/ajps.12207

Dickson, B. J., 2014, Who wants to be a communist? Career incentives and mobilized loyalty in China. *The China Quarterly*, **217**, pp. 42–68. doi:10.1017/S0305741013001434

Dunleavy, P. and Hood, C., 1994, From old public administration to new public management. *Public Money & Management*, **14**(3), pp. 9–16. doi:10.1080/09540969409387823

Ferraz, C. and Finan, F., 2008, Exposing corrupt politicians: The effects of Brazil's publicly released audits on electoral outcomes*. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, **123**(2), pp. 703–745. doi:10.1162/qjec.2008.123.2.703

George, A. L. and Bennett, A., 2005, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press). https://books.google.com/books?hl=zh-CN&lr=&id=JEGzE6ExN-gC&oi=fnd&pg=PR9&dq=Case+Studies+and+Theory+Development+in+the+Social+Sciences.&ots=HO4g56p5Wr&sig=iw_djogFq_Y3smj29qMG6d9zuoE

Glaser, B. and Strauss, A., 2017, *Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Routledge https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9780203793206/discovery-grounded-theory-barney-glaser-anselm-strauss

Greenstone, M., He, G., Jia, R., and Liu, T., 2022, Can technology solve the principal-agent problem? Evidence from China's war on air pollution. *American Economic Review: Insights*, **4**(1), pp. 54–70. doi:10.1257/aeri.20200373

Habich-Sobiegalla, S., Zheng, H., and Pluemmer, F., 2024, Temporal governance and accountability costs of Beijing's digital citizen request system. *Regulation & Governance*, rego **12612**, doi:10.1111/rego.12612

Heilmann, S., 2005, Regulatory innovation by Leninist means: Communist Party supervision in China's financial industry. *The China Quarterly*, **181**, pp. 1–21. doi:10.1017/S0305741005000019

Henderson, L. J. and Center, W. D. S. (2003). The Baltimore CitiStat program. *IBM Endowment for the Business of Government*. Available at https://www.businessofgovernment.org/sites/default/files/CitiStat.pdf

Holmstrom, B., 1979, Moral Hazard and Observability. *The Bell Journal of Economics*, **10**(1), 74. doi:10.2307/3003320

Holmstrom, B. and Milgrom, P., 1991, Multitask principal–agent analyses: Incentive contracts, asset ownership, and job design. *The Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization*, **7**(special_issue), pp. 24–52. doi:10.1093/jleo/7.special_issue.24

Hood, C., 1991, A public management for all seasons? *Public Administration*, **69**(1), pp. 3–19. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9299.1991.tb00779.x

Landry, P. F., Lü, X., and Duan, H., 2018, Does performance matter? Evaluating political selection along the Chinese administrative ladder. *Comparative Political Studies*, **51**(8), pp. 1074–1105. doi:10.1177/0010414017730078

Li, H. and Zhou, L.-A., 2005, Political turnover and economic performance: The incentive role of personnel control in China. *Journal of Public Economics*, **89**(9–10), pp. 1743–1762. doi:10.1016/j.jpubeco.2004.06.009

Liu, N. N., Lo, C. W.-H., Zhan, X., and Wang, W., 2015, Campaign-style enforcement and regulatory compliance. *Public Administration Review*, **75**(1), pp. 85–95. doi:10.1111/puar.12285

McCubbins, M. D. and Schwartz, T., 1984, Congressional oversight overlooked: Police patrols versus fire alarms. *American Journal of Political Science*, **28**(1), 165. doi:10.2307/2110792

Mitnick, B. M., 1975, The theory of agency: The policing "paradox" and regulatory behavior. *Public Choice*, **24**(1), pp. 27–42. doi:10.1007/BF01718413

O'Brien, K. J. and Li, L., 1999, Selective policy implementation in rural China. *Comparative Politics*, **31**(2), 167. doi:10.2307/422143

Olken, B. A., 2007, Monitoring corruption: Evidence from a field experiment in Indonesia. *Journal of Political Economy*, **115**(2), pp. 200–249. doi:10.1086/517935

Olken, B. A. and Pande, R., 2012, Corruption in developing countries. *Annual Review of Economics*, **4**(1), pp. 479–509. doi:10.1146/annurev-economics-080511-110917

Osborne, D. and Gaebler, T., 1992, *Reinventing Government: How the Entrepreneurial Spirit is Transforming the Public Sector* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley).

Ouyang, W., Liu, W., and Zhang, S., 2025, Social workers' work effort, engagement, and reward: Evidence from Beijing. *Journal of Social Work*, **25**(3), pp. 338–358. doi:10.1177/14680173251318526

Perry, E. J., 2024, China's Governance in the "New Era" of Xi Jinping. *Perspectives on Politics*, **22**(4), pp. 1297–1303. doi:10.1017/S1537592724001683

Ruggeri, K., Stock, F., Haslam, S. A., Capraro, V., Boggio, P., Ellemers, N., Cichocka, A., Douglas, K. M., Rand, D. G., Van Der Linden, S., Cikara, M., Finkel, E. J., Druckman, J. N., Wohl, M. J. A., Petty, R. E., Tucker, J. A., Shariff, A., Gelfand, M., Packer, D., and Willer, R., 2024, A synthesis of evidence for policy from behavioural science during COVID-19. *Nature*, **625**(7993), pp. 134–147. doi:10.1038/s41586-023-06840-9

Vito, G. F., Reed, J. C., and Walsh, W. F., 2017, Police executives' and managers' perspectives on Compstat*. *Police Practice and Research*, **18**(1), pp. 15–25. doi:10.1080/15614263.2016.1205986

Wang, H. H., Cheng, E. W., Chen, X., and Liang, H., 2025, How institutionalized feedback works: Online citizen complaints and local government responsiveness in China. *Governance*, **38**(2), e12907. doi:10.1111/gove.12907

Wei, W., Wang, C., Zhai, W., and Li, W., 2023, "Honor List" and "Shame Roll": Quasi-Experimental evidence of the effect of performance feedback under political control. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, **33**(1), pp. 122–138. doi:10.1093/jopart/muac011

Weisburd, D., Mastrofski, S. D., Mcnally, A. M., Greenspan, R., and Willis, J. J., 2003, Reforming to preserve: Compstat and strategic problem solving in American policing. *Criminology & Public Policy*, **2**(3), pp. 421–456. doi:10.1111/j.1745-9133.2003.tb00006.x

Woodcock, J., 2020, The algorithmic panopticon at Deliveroo: Measurement, precarity, and the illusion of control. *Ephemera: Theory & Politics in Organizations*, **20**(3), 67–95.

Xiao, S. and Zhu, X., 2022, Bureaucratic control and strategic compliance: How do subnational governments implement central guidelines in China? *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, **32**(2), 342–359. 10.1093/jopart/muab030

Zhao, S., 2016, The ideological campaign in Xi's China. *Asian Survey*, **56**(6), 1168–1193. 10.1525/as.2016.56.6.1168

Zuboff, S., 2019, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York, NY: PublicAffairs). Available at https://www.academia.edu/download/61529191/GoodReads-The-Age-Of-Surveillance-Capitalism-The-Fight-For-A-Human-Future-At-The-New-Frontier-Of-Po20191216-80044-105m52n.pdf (accessed 15 May 2025).

Appendix A: Methodological Details

A1. Case Selection, Site Access, and Observations

Our study employs an insider perspective, grounded in the authors' institutional affiliation with the [organization's name was intentionally deleted for review]. This position provided unique and longitudinal access to the *Jiesu Jiban* reform.

Case Selection (Comprehensive Tracking): This study did not rely on post-hoc sampling (e.g., selecting high-, medium-, and low-performing cases). Instead, our research team has been systematically tracking the *Jiesu Jiban* reform since its inception (circa 2018–2019). Our access allowed for a comprehensive, municipality-wide scope, covering the implementation across all of Beijing's major districts (including but not limited to Chaoyang, Haidian, Xicheng, Dongcheng, and Fengtai). This comprehensive tracking, rather than selective sampling, forms the empirical basis of our analysis, allowing us to observe the reform's rollout and evolution as a continuous process rather than a static snapshot.

Site Access and Observations (Embedded Perspective): Our institutional role facilitated unparalleled access. We did not enter field sites as "outsiders"; rather, we were invited to observe and study the reform's implementation. This granted us access to:

1. District-level accountability workshops: Allowing us to observe *tiao–kuai* interactions and the activation of performance data (as described in Section 5.4).
2. Street-level "noon meetings" (*wujian hui*): Providing a frontline view of how work orders were processed and how cadres experienced performance pressure.
3. 12345 Hotline Call Center: Granting insight into the technological and human processes behind the initial dispatch.

Our insider status enabled a level of data triangulation and process-tracing that would be unavailable to external researchers. The observations and interviews cited throughout this paper are drawn from this long-term, comprehensive, and embedded engagement with the reform across Beijing.

A2. Interviewee Sample

We conducted 42 semi-structured interviews. The breakdown is as follows:

Level	Role	Number
Municipal	Officials at Municipal Bureau of Gov. Services & Data	5
District (tiao)	District-level Party/Gov. Leaders	4
	Heads of District Functional Bureaus (e.g., Urban Mgt.)	8
Street (kuai)	Street Office/Township Directors	10
	Frontline Community/Grid Cadres (网格员)	10
Operational	12345 Hotline Call Center Managers & Staff	5
Total		**42**

A3. Codebook Development and Sample

As noted in the main text, our fieldwork spanned an extended period, during which all materials – including interview transcripts and field notes – were processed immediately after data collection, with coding completed on-site right after each session. Over the course of several years, this iterative process of coding (integrating both theory-driven deductive codes and data-driven inductive codes) gradually shaped our codebook. The subsequent analysis was conducted using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. Below is a sample of our coding structure, illustrating how we operationalized our theoretical concepts.

Table A1: Sample thematic codebook

Theoretical theme (deductive)	Second-level code	Example inductive code (from data)	Example quote (anonymized)
1. Political embeddedness	1.1 Principal's mandate	Priority task (中心工作)	*This wasn't just another task; the district secretary told us it was a "priority task". We knew what that meant.*
	1.2 Public rituals	Political test/shame roll (黑榜)	*Being on the shame roll . . . it felt like a political failure, not just an administrative one. It was a test of loyalty.*
	1.3 Party leadership	Party leads at frontline	*The Party committee, not just the admin office, now leads the daily Jiesu Jiban meeting. That tells you everything.*
2. Performance discipline	2.1 Algorithmic verification	Digital gaokao	*The dashboard is a digital gaokao. Everyone's score is visible to everyone, all the time. There is nowhere to hide.*
	2.2 Performance metrics	The Three Rates	*All that matters is the "Three Rates" (response, resolution, satisfaction). Our bonuses . . . everything is tied to them.*
	2.3 Accountability	First-contact responsibility	*We got the dispatch, so even though it was the water bureau's pipe, it was our first-contact responsibility to fix it.*
3. Tiao–kuai reconfiguration	3.1 Pre-reform (baseline)	Buck-passing/agent failure	*Before, we'd just send a letter to the Urban Management Bureau and it would disappear into a black hole.*

(*continued*)

Table A1: (*Continued*)

Theoretical theme (deductive)	Second-level code	Example inductive code (from data)	Example quote (anonymized)
	3.2 Post-reform (outcome)	Monitored cooperation	*Now, we are all on the same ticket. If they [the bureau] are slow, my score goes down. So I call them ten times a day.*
	3.3 New power dynamic	Kuai empowerment/ noon meeting	*The noon meeting gives me, the street director, the power to summon the bureau officials. Before, they would ignore me.*
4. Tensions (inductive)	4.1 Bureaucratic stress	Burnout/pressure	*We are solving problems 24/7. The pressure is immense. People are burning out. I haven't taken a weekend off in months.*
	4.2 Strategic behavior	Gaming/quick fix	*Some offices just do a quick fix, get the citizen to click "satisfied," and close the ticket in seven days. The root cause is still there.*
	4.3 Systemic limits	COVID overload	*The system works for potholes, not for a pandemic. We were just flooded. The Three Rates became meaningless.*