


Temporal governance and accountability costs of Beijing's digital citizen request system

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Abstract

Prior literature highlights democracies' struggle to cope with today's rapid socio-economic changes, contrasting with more adept responses in authoritarian systems. This study makes a first attempt to explain the perceived speediness in an authoritarian setting. By focusing on Beijing's digital service request system, *Jiesu Jiban*, we argue that in creating request categories, standardizing cadres' reactions to requests, and designing decision pathways, *Jiesu Jiban* is not only an instrument to deal with increasing complexity and acceleration of socio-economic development, but the system itself also creates acceleration. It does so by categorizing, specifying, and standardizing service requests and response procedures and by channeling these through a digital infrastructure. We show that the datafication of governing citizens' request increases pressure for frontline administrators co-producing a system of responsibility without accountability for the central government.

Keywords: Beijing, datafication, smart city, temporal governance, urban governance, urban service delivery.

1. Introduction

The rapid pace of economic, social, and environmental changes in recent decades has led scholars to question the effectiveness of democratic institutions in dealing with challenges arising from acceleration (e.g., Rosa & Trejo-Mathys, 2013). As a result of extended processes of participation and decision-making inherent in democratic systems, studies identify a "temporal dilemma of governing" that inhibits democratic systems from addressing pressing policy problems of our time (Barbehön, 2022). Following this argument, authoritarian governments that lack lengthy deliberation processes must be much better equipped to navigate the increasingly fast pace of socio-economic transformation. However, in China, this appears to apply only to select topics deemed of utmost importance by the Chinese leadership, such as air pollution (Shen & Ahlers, 2019), poverty alleviation (Tsai & Liao, 2020), or combating COVID-19 (Habich-Sobiegalla & Plümmer, 2023). In other cases, scholars have shown that lengthy deliberation processes exist in China's authoritarian regime (Truex, 2018) and that swift policy implementation is not the norm (Gong & Tu, 2022). In essence, little is known about the temporal dimensions of Chinese policymaking.

This article represents a first attempt to systematically analyze the relationship between policymaking and time in China's authoritarian regime, focusing on how the party-state both governs and is governed by time. Building on scholarship that analyzes the temporal aspects of policymaking (Aradau & Blanke, 2017; Barbehön, 2022; Opitz & Tellmann, 2015; Pierson, 2004; Pollitt, 2008; Wenzel et al., 2020), this article investigates an exemplary case of how time is used as a governing tool in Beijing's digital approach to managing service requests, known as *Jiesu Jiban*, directly translated as "instantly respond to requests once received." The article

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answers questions about the nature of *Jiesu Jiban*, how it works, which consequences it has for managing time during policy implementation, and finally, what this system can tell us about policy implementation in contemporary China more generally.

Modeled upon city service request systems (so-called 311 systems) implemented in the United States (Stowers, 2022), *Jiesu Jiban* was first introduced in China in 2019 by Beijing's municipal government. The *Jiesu Jiban* case is particularly useful in analyzing the temporal dimensions of governance because—as exemplified below—it introduces two kinds of temporal characteristics into Beijing's urban management: on the one hand, the system is designed to digitally automatize response procedures and deadlines for handling requests. Through this, the government attempts to swiftly solve problems with China's existing citizen feedback systems, deemed inadequately slow and only partly responsive (Li, 2020). On the other hand, *Jiesu Jiban* is becoming part of an overall effort to collect troves of data on urban management and ultimately establish what the Chinese party-state refers to as a system of data-driven “proactive governance” (Beijing Government, 2021). While Beijing's case is distinctive owing to its role as the capital, it is crucial to comprehend how city governments in China respond to Xi Jinping's call to improve urban governance, especially in China's megacities (Xinhua, 2020). Spearheaded by Cai Qi, the former party secretary of Beijing and the current secretary of the Secretariat of the Chinese Communist Party—one of China's most influential politicians—the central government is already championing Beijing's model (Xinhua, 2024), prompting other cities to adopt similar systems (Hohhot Government, 2023).

Prior research on US-based service request systems focuses on the technologies and agents used in call centers (Nam & Pardo, 2013, 2014), the determinants for citizens' utilization of the system (O'Brien et al., 2016; Wu, 2020), its implications for government accountability and responsiveness (Schwester et al., 2009), and citizen relationship management (Hartmann et al., 2017). Two significant gaps exist in this literature: first, limited understanding exists regarding the application of such systems in diverse political contexts, especially in a one-party authoritarian regime like China's, which, akin to democratic systems, responds to societal demands (Habich, 2016; Heurlin, 2016; Kornreich, 2019; Teets, 2018; Truex, 2017). However, the sources of responsiveness differ across the two types of regimes, with consequences for the nature and effectiveness of responsive channels (Chen et al., 2016). While in democracies, government responsiveness is a reaction to pressure from below through citizens' political action (Cleary, 2007; Putnam, 1994) or elections (Powell, 2000), in authoritarian regimes, pressure may emanate from above (oversight through different tiers of government) and below (such as through threats of collective action) (Chen et al., 2016), both directions simultaneously (Habich, 2016), and the perceived need from the one-party regime to collect information about their citizens (Distelhorst & Hou, 2017). Moreover, while in democracies, politicians are accountable to the public, China's central-party state practices selective “responsiveness without accountability” addressing only specific public demands, with local officials being accountable solely to their superiors (Dickson, 2021, p. 4). Second, prior literature has overlooked the temporal aspects of service request systems and their implications for frontline governance, particularly evident in the case of Beijing. More than other e-government services, *Jiesu Jiban* not merely prioritizes responding to societal demands and managing government performance (Ma, 2021a), but also the timeliness of doing so.

The paper argues that *Jiesu Jiban*'s datafication—defined as the transformation of various aspects of life into quantifiable data that can be tracked, analyzed, and used to drive decision-making (Newell & Marabelli, 2015)—amplifies the strength of temporal governance. Through creating request categories, standardizing appropriate reactions, establishing decision pathways, and automating feedback, *Jiesu Jiban* defines speed and rhythm, ultimately causing an acceleration of frontline governance. Our findings carry implications for understanding governance in China more generally. While *Jiesu Jiban* represents an extreme form of acceleration, it mirrors broader trends in Chinese governance, including the widespread adoption of data-driven approaches (Lee, 2019), increasingly intricate performance evaluations (e.g., Zhan et al., 2013), and the consequent mounting pressure on local officials, coupled with cascading policy targets (Li, 2022).

The analysis draws from multiple sources, including individual and group interviews conducted between June 2018 and March 2023, internal and public government documents, and notes taken during bureaucratic meetings and workshops that discussed the mechanism, including discussions concerning policy design, legal aspects, and local officials' feedback. Altogether, as part of a research project commissioned by the Beijing Municipal Administration of Government Affairs, the second author interviewed 42 people in groups or individually. The interviewees included local government officials and representatives from the municipal level, 3 district-level, and

15 township-level governments (i.e., street committees in the context of urban areas) in Beijing.¹ The interviewees included district and neighborhood party secretaries, representatives of district-level urban management bureaus, urban management command centers and organization departments, neighborhood-level big data centers, Beijing's Municipal Government Affairs Service Administration, and the citizen complaint bureaucracy. The interviews were semistructured and lasted between one and two hours, providing insight into the policymaking and implementation process of *Jiesu Jiban* as well as unexpected implications of the system. For confidentiality purposes, all interviewees are anonymized or referred to with pseudonyms.

2. Accelerating the present to shape the future

Barbehön (2022) contends that policymakers' differing interpretations of time significantly influence policymaking and the temporal dynamics of social and political life. The perception of the future, whether seen as a threat or an opportunity, shapes political action. For example, governments viewing the future as risky yet manageable analyze present-day data to understand their populace better and proactively mitigate potential risks. In policing practices, this has spurred the integration of automated prediction tools (Aradau & Blanke, 2017) and the development of platform policing (Bernot, 2024). Likewise, in smart city governance, the reliance on real-time data to anticipate future scenarios supplants decision-making based on anecdotal evidence and intuition (Kitchin, 2014), prompting governments to establish increasingly centralized platforms that use digital tools for comprehensive data collection, management, and interpretation of citizen information to inform policy design (Aradau & Blanke, 2017; Flyverbom & Garsten, 2021; Klauser et al., 2014).

Datafication and real-time decision-making drive the perceived acceleration of social, political, and economic processes (Rosa & Trejo-Mathys, 2013; Scheuerman, 2004). In an "acceleration society," the pace of life and technological advancements mutually reinforce, creating a culture where individuals must keep up to avoid lagging behind (Rosa, 2003, pp. 10–11). Paradoxically, attempts to alleviate perceived time scarcity through innovations like automobiles or mobile phones exacerbate the issue by further accelerating social life (Castells, 2010; Urry, 2001). In policymaking, big data amplifies the perceived complexity of political challenges, fueling a sense of urgency to address issues promptly and a constant perception of insufficient time to plan adequately. Decision-makers are pressured to anticipate and address risks before they escalate into threats, with failures often attributed to inadequate data collection efforts (Barbehön, 2022).

As street-level bureaucrats are responsible for enacting public policies (Lipsky, 1981; Zacka, 2017), the acceleration of social and political life directly impacts their work. Yet, to date, the literature on frontline governance has largely focused on digitalization without considering the factor of acceleration. Datafication and partial automation standardize interactions with citizens (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; Buffat, 2015), shifting discretion from bureaucrats to programmers (Busch et al., 2018; Young et al., 2019). While such systems enhance decision-making transparency and the possibility of handling larger caseloads (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002), they also risk further burdening frontline bureaucracy, exacerbating time scarcity caused by new technologies.

3. Acceleration and digitalization of frontline governance in China

The former sections on the intersection between politics and time are based on processes observed in liberal democracies. However, despite encountering comparable challenges in political planning complexity, China also faces (perceived) threats to its one-party regime, adding further urgency to deal with political problems. Hence, on top of the structures established in stable democracies to plan for livable cities, increase climate change resilience, or prevent pandemics, China's one-party regime relies on, among others, a combination of strengthened vertical cadre control, selective societal participation, and growing digitalization of public service provision (Dickson, 2021; Gao & Tan, 2020; Kornreich, 2019).

Centralization efforts severely restrict local government autonomy. From higher administrative levels, governments below the provincial level face frequent inspections, performance assessments, and the necessity to attract investments. From below, local cadres face resistance from local communities when tasked with implementing unpopular government policies (Habich, 2016; Zhao, 2014). Fee and tax reforms of the Hu-Wen administration have stripped township governments of their revenues and shifted their budgets to county management

(Wong, 2021). Further centralization under Xi Jinping has exacerbated the situation. Central control instruments such as the anticorruption campaign (Wedeman, 2017), the consolidation of leading small groups throughout the party-state bureaucracy (Ma, 2021b), the proliferation of central inspection teams (Yang & Yan, 2018), and reforms of the performance evaluation system have increased local governments’ pressure (Zhang, 2020). Moreover, decentralized policy experimentation (Heilmann, 2008), characterized by openness toward an uncertain future and time-insensitive trial and error (Barbehön, 2022), has given way to “experimentation under pressure” (Heffer & Schubert, 2023) and frequent campaigns with strict policy targets and timelines (Zeng, 2019). Digitalizing government services and public participation channels further increases the pressure, creating a “digital iron cage” for local officials, severely restricting their discretion (Gao & Tan, 2020, p. 72). The remainder of this article introduces the latest version of such a digital iron cage and its effects on acceleration.

3.1. The system of swiftly responding to service requests (*Jiesu Jiban*)

Introduced in 2019 by Beijing’s Municipal Government Affairs Service Administration (BMGASA), *Jiesu Jiban*, builds on previous intragovernmental reforms, especially the so-called whistle-blowing mechanism (*jiexiang chuishao bumen baodao*). The whistle-blowing mechanism has been implemented in Beijing since 2016 to address the frequently lamented lack of authority of township-level governments in China. Through their work at the lowest administrative level, township-level governments face and observe social, environmental, and other problems much more frequently than their higher-level counterparts, without the authority and resources to solve many of them (Chöng, 2016; Yang, 2012). The whistle-blowing mechanism encourages township-level governments in Beijing to report issues directly (i.e., “blow the whistle”) to higher-level authorities, which—unlike previously—are now required to act in response (Zhu et al., 2018). *Jiesu Jiban* extends this whistleblower role to Beijing’s residents, shifting the narrative of citizens from being passive recipients to active participants in the governing process (see also Fig. 1). This emphasis aligns with the objective of implementing the mass line, a Mao-era principle that has garnered increased attention under Xi Jinping (Lam, 2016). In Chinese policy and scholarly discourse, *Jiesu Jiban* is recognized as “the mass line of the new era,” expanding political participation channels for the people (Wang & Mao, 2021, p. 8).

Jiesu Jiban complements and expands existing channels of information collection and recent (digital) interventions in state-society and intragovernment relations. For example, *Jiesu Jiban* aligns with grid management, which combines intragovernment reforms with the digitalized collection of resident data designed to govern citizens within their respective residential grids and resolve neighborhood conflicts. In contrast to *Jiesu Jiban*, which

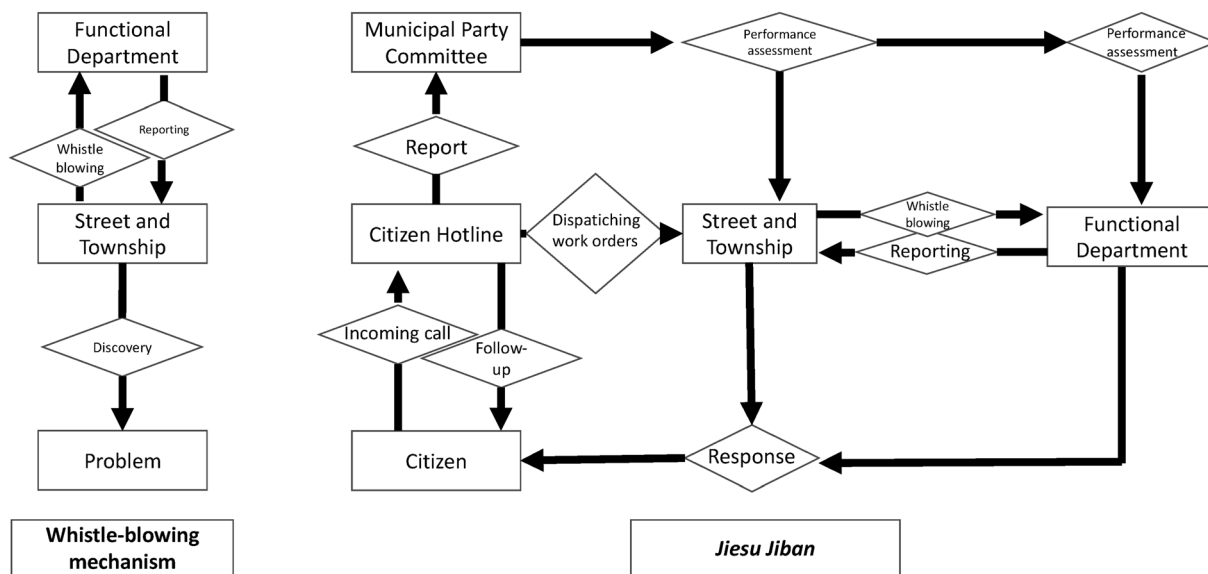


Figure 1 Comparison of the operational processes of the whistle-blowing mechanism and *Jiesu Jiban*. Source: Adapted from Ma et al. (2020, p. 21).

relies on data submitted by residents stored at the municipal level, grid management collects data through grid managers and stores them in county-level command centers (Habich-Sobiegalla & Plümmer, 2023; Tang, 2020). *Jiesu Jiban* also complements existing responsive channels, including the petition system, local mayor's hotlines, and mailboxes, initiated by local governments in the late 1980s (Hartford, 2005). Subsequently, online platforms were introduced to publicize residents' messages and officials' responses, set response deadlines, and conduct performance assessments. These measures aimed to improve the transparency, accountability, and efficiency of front-line governance (Distelhorst & Hou, 2017; Hartford, 2005; Hou, 2023; Luehrmann, 2003). At the same time, they are also used by local officials to please their superiors and constituents (Wang & Han, 2023).

Jiesu Jiban stands out from other channels in several ways. First, it handles a significantly larger data volume; in 2020 alone, it processed nearly 9 million requests, compared to the Mayor's Mailbox, which handled fewer than 3,000 messages. Additionally, data processing for *Jiesu Jiban* is overseen by BMGASA, unlike the mayor's mailbox, which the Public Complaints Office manages. Despite similar administrative ranks, BMGASA has the authority to evaluate local officials based on their *Jiesu Jiban* performance, thus wielding greater power over their promotion prospects. Furthermore, *Jiesu Jiban* differs from the petition system, which predominantly deals with grievances against government policies by handling all types of requests much more rapidly. Unlike the petition system, which requires residents to register, *Jiesu Jiban* has a lower submission threshold and offers greater anonymity to requesters (Li et al., 2012; Wong & Peng, 2015).

Jiesu Jiban is built around the '12345 hotline' Acc, a 24-hour telephone hotline enabling citizens to actively report issues and make service requests. Operated by the Beijing Municipal Citizen's Hotline Service Center, which falls under the purview of BMGASA, the hotline merges various nonemergency service lines from different bureaus, including transportation and social security. Complementing the telephone service, residents can submit requests through web browsers and a WeChat mini-program (BMGASA, 2019).²

Each received complaint undergoes a four-step process involving all government tiers in Beijing. Specially developed software partially automates this process. It starts with complaint reception at the municipal level, followed by complaint assignment, either by municipal staff or by the software itself. Next, lower government levels (i.e., district, street/town, and community levels, the latter not being a formal government entity) handle the complaint. Finally, the municipal level conducts the evaluation stage (see Fig. 1). The following two sections depict the request-handling process, focusing on the temporal characteristics of the system.

3.2. An example of receiving and swiftly handling service requests

Figure 2 captures the initial phase of complaint intake, when one of the 200 staff members of the municipal hotline service center receives, logs, and timestamps each complaint. In our case, the complaint was received by Zhang Yijun, who, on November 2, 2021, received a call from Mr Wang. The platform captures essential details about the complainant, including their district and whether they represent themselves, a corporation, or another civic entity. For individual complainants, the system can access additional personal information from interconnected resident databases, such as registered contact numbers or affiliation with particular demographics, notably those marked as "special populations," a term used to identify individuals with issues like substance dependence or mental health concerns. The system also registers if the complainant is from a household with a history of frequent requests or if their information warrants confidentiality. The need for the latter arises when the complaint involves allegations against local government officials, which might lead to possible retributive actions against the complainant—a phenomenon frequently reported for the petition system (Li et al., 2012; Wong & Peng, 2015). Confidentiality as part of *Jiesu Jiban* means that the complainant's personal information is not transferred to the district level. In our case, lower levels receive the complainant's surname and phone number, which our interviewees in the government bureaucracy also consider relatively anonymous despite the fact that local officials still can access the complainant's personal information if they wish to do so.

Regarding the issue of repeated calling, an interviewee highlighted that some individuals persistently call the hotline due to unresolved requests, loneliness or 'mental disabilities'. Yet, even when the hotline staff suspects that a call is unrelated to issues within the scope of *Jiesu Jiban*, they are instructed not to hang up. (Interview with a representative of BMGASA, February 28, 2022).

1

Basic information

Request reception 接

Request channel: 12345 Reception unit: 12345 citizen hotline service center Request number: Hotline-2110-0069

Reception time: 2021-11-02 10:02:02

*Contacting party: Individual (drop down menu)

Information on receiving staff member

Staff number: 123456

Name: Zhang Yijun

Department: Receiving Group no. X

Complainant Information

Special reminder: Please strictly protect the information of the complainant!

* Name: Mr. Wang

* Sex: Male

* Number called from: 15123456789

Citizenship: China

Province/ City: Beijing

County/ District: Dragon Gate District

Address: Not detailed

Specific group of people
 Household with frequent requests
 Complainant’s information is secret

Serial number	Contact Type	Number/ Account	Date of creation
1	Mobile phone	13123456789	2021-04-04 14:32:12
2	Mobile phone	15123456789	2021-04-04 14:32:06

Figure 2 Recreated screenshot 1 depicting the request reception process of Beijing’s digital complaint platform. *Note:* In Figures 2–5, to ensure the anonymity of the complainant and the staff handling the complaint, the names of individuals and places, dates, and times have been changed by the authors. The time intervals reflect the actual intervals reported in the original screenshot. *Source:* Figures 2–5 have been created by the authors based on original screenshots provided by BMGASA. Published with permission.

Forwarding a complaint to the responsible lower level is the second step in the handling process undertaken by the hotline staff member who first receives the call. In cases where the request is found unreasonable such as drunk calling, the hotline staff member does not transfer the request to the lower levels. The dispatch process is captured in Figure 3. After Mr Wang filed his request on November 2, 2021, at 10:02 a.m., the handling of the request first gets assigned to the district government where the problem was observed. At the district level, the district urban management command centers, established during the whistle-blowing reform, are responsible for further assignment of the request to the relevant departments and agencies at this or the next lower township level. In our case, Dragon Gate District passed on the request handling to Eternal Town, where computer and phone screens of township representatives display the request, prompting users to quickly acknowledge receipt. According to our data, at 10:07 a.m. on the same day, the request information showed up as an assignment on the computer screens of Eternal Town, whose representatives confirmed its receipt at 10:11 a.m.—merely five minutes after the complaint was first received. This prompt response can be explained by the fact that the speedy acceptance of requests is part of subsequent performance evaluations of local cadres to be discussed further in the following text.

Figure 3 displays the information provided to the township, detailing the type of request, its explanation, and its urgency. In this instance, the concern pertains to rubbish dumping observed by Mr Wang at a local factory gate. Utilizing a predetermined problem classification system integral to *Jiesu Jiban*, Zhang, the hotline operator, categorizes Mr Wang’s request, triggering the display of relevant laws and regulations, such as the Beijing Municipal Regulation on the Management of Household Waste. Notably, the description of the problem concludes with a reminder to inform the complainant about the problem-solving process—a recurring emphasis in official documents related to *Jiesu Jiban*.

Further down, Zhang is tasked with describing the problem and assessing its importance by selecting tags provided in the software. These tags serve various purposes: some, like “prioritize,” determine the urgency of handling the request, while others denote the policy field or political slogans associated with it. In this instance,

2

Reported problem

* Type: Complaint (drop down menu) Reported person: Not detailed Phone no. of reported person: Not detailed

* Topic: Rubbish dumping problem

* Main content: The citizen complained that at the east gate of the wood factory in Hege Village, Eternal Town, Dragon Gate District, Beijing city, somebody disposed of their garbage. It is not clear who it was. It happened several times already. Calling to report the problem of the rubbish dumping. Note: Please inform complainant about the complaint handling process in due time.

* County/ District of location: Dragon Gate District (drop down menu) * Street Committee: Eternal Town, Dragon Gate District (drop down menu) * Address: East gate of the wood factory in Hege Village

* Problem classification: Garbage sorting/ garbage processing/ unregulated collection, transport, handling of garbage (drop down menu)

Beijing Municipal Regulation on the Management of Household Waste

Tags (multiple choice): Seven Guarantees and Five Qualities (七有五性), livability (宜居性)

Seven Guarantees, Five Qualities COVID-19 Emergency (突发事件) Factors of instability (不稳定因素)
 Prioritize Complaint and report (投诉举报) Representative complaint Valuable information
 Common reply

Keywords:

Responsible unit: Township level (街乡镇) (drop down menu) Eternal Town, Dragon Gate District (drop down menu)

Attachments	Name of Attachment	Time of upload	Uploading unit	Working no. of uploading unit	File format	Size
	174459697570_Hotline-2110-0069(1min36secsolvedsatisfactorily).wav	2021-11-07 14:57:22	Eternal Town, Dragon Gate District	W228000	wav	548

Figure 3 Recreated screenshot 2 depicting the assignment process of Beijing’s digital complaint platform.

the tags align with the “seven guarantees” and “five qualities” slogans advocated by the 19th Party Congress and Beijing’s municipal government, respectively. The “seven guarantees” emphasize public welfare and living standards improvement across areas such as education, employment, and healthcare. Conversely, the “five qualities” slogan represents Beijing’s pursuit of enhanced living standards, encompassing “convenience, livability, diversity, fairness, and security” (Beijing Government, 2022). This classification allows the government to directly link their work in *Jiesu Jiban* with the fulfillment of these slogans.

The final two phases of the complaint-handling process involve the documentation of the complaint-handling and the evaluation by the complainant (Figs 4 and 5). After the request reached Eternal Town, its representatives investigated the garbage dumping site on November 3, one day after the complaint had been launched. Hege Village representatives (under the jurisdiction of Eternal Town) subsequently cleared the garbage and increased monitoring of the area to prevent future garbage dumping.

Mr Wang, the complainant, was promptly informed of the outcome via phone, demonstrating the importance of feedback. During this call, Mr Wang first expressed satisfaction with the result at 1 minute and 36 seconds and further expressed great satisfaction at 1 minute and 41 seconds. The audio file of the call, stored as an attachment in the system, serves as verification, with timestamps in the filename. Wang Ye, another hotline service center staff member, undertakes the “request assessment” by verifying completion based on the audio file and a report from Eternal Town, as detailed in Figure 5.

As part of the evaluation phase, the complainant is called again, as displayed in Figure 5. This time another hotline staff member calls Mr Wang using a preformatted script generated by the software to conduct a three-part follow-up. The complainant is queried on whether the department contacted them, if their issue was resolved, and their level of satisfaction with the resolution provided.

In sum, time emerges as a core element of *Jiesu Jiban* in several ways. First, it is evident in the overwhelming volume of daily requests. For instance, on February 23, 2019, the hotline received close to 12,000 calls, and staffers made 2,160 follow-up calls, illustrated in Figure 5 (BMGASA, 2019). This substantial workload offers little time for individual calls, even presuming that all 200 hotline staffers were active on that day. Second, the importance of time becomes prevalent through the timestamped audio files that allow for quick verification of the complainant’s satisfaction with the request handling.

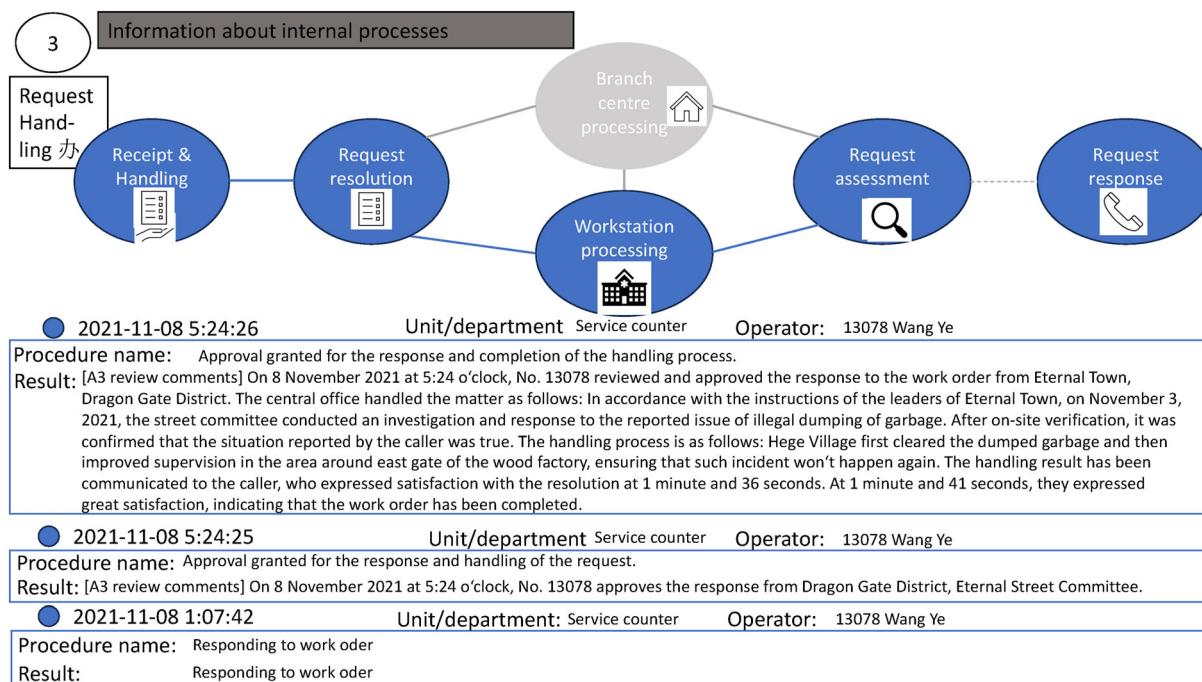


Figure 4 Recreated screenshot 3 depicting the handling process of Beijing’s digital complaint platform.

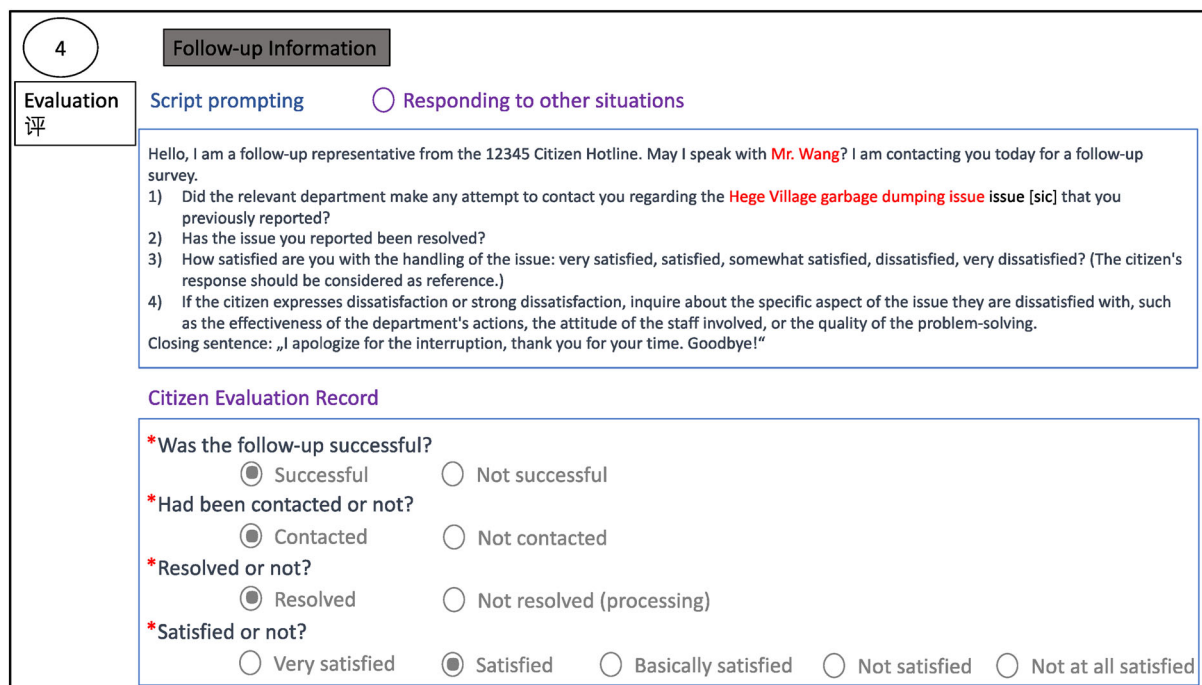


Figure 5 Recreated screenshot 4 depicting the citizen feedback process of Beijing’s digital complaint platform.

Third, being quick is also important for grassroots officials who receive the assignment. Because cadres are evaluated based, among others, on their timely response (including timely acceptance, feedback, and completion of the request), grassroots officials make sure to quickly accept and resolve assignments. In fact, this temporal aspect in performance evaluations is an important lever in steering cadre behavior that is adjusted based on the urgency with which policy targets ought to be implemented. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the

municipal government distinguished between pandemic-related requests and other so-called “daily requests.” While for the former, the timely response to the request counted 40 percent toward the final evaluation, for the latter, it counted only 20 percent. The other two components of the performance evaluation included the resolution rate and the satisfaction of the complainant, the latter of which counted only 20 percent for pandemic-related requests (Interview with a staff member of the hotline service center, September 3, 2021).

Hence, *Jiesu Jiban* offers the municipal leadership the flexibility to adjust the pace and flow of frontline governance and policy implementation. By embedding policy labels within the software, the government can quantify and monitor its policy accomplishments, simultaneously alerting officials to policy objectives and associated requests. Likewise, the cessation of labels like COVID-19 diminishes the urgency tied to these requests, slowing down their handling process. Although speed remains crucial, accounting for at least 20 percent of performance evaluations, it comes at the expense of complainant satisfaction during proclaimed crises such as COVID-19.

Performance evaluations constitute another element in the acceleration cycle surrounding *Jiesu Jiban*. In our interviews with officials of the hotline service center and representatives from the district and township levels, we learned that the pressure on local cadres because of the continuous performance evaluations is high. Each month, the city party secretary names the 10 lowest- and highest-ranked streets and towns. Because district leaders do not want their streets and towns to be part of the lowest 10, which would reflect poorly on their performance evaluations, they continuously check up on the listings and interview leaders of lowly ranked streets and towns within their jurisdictions. For example, a street leader of one district was separately interviewed by the district's party secretary, governor, deputy governor, and somebody from the district's disciplinary inspection. Altogether, within one week, the street party secretary had to undergo six interviews with representatives from the district level in which he had to explain the reason for being ranked so low. Having to make self-criticisms over and over again, we are being told many party secretaries become emotional, complaining about the fact that out of 343 streets and towns, it is extremely difficult to maintain a position within the top 100 because they all have only a few decimal points of difference in their evaluations (Interview with staff member of the hotline service center, September 3, 2021). Hence, district leaders directly pass on the pressure to frontline officials—a situation which has been referred to as cascading policy targets (*ceng jia ma*) where each level of government adds another layer of goals or stricter deadlines to those given to them by higher levels only to ensure that their own goals are fulfilled (Li, 2022).

4. Categorizing, specifying, and standardizing the present

The introduction of *Jiesu Jiban* brought with it a systematic effort of analyzing and classifying citizen complaints to quickly identify the urgency of the complaint and the responsible actors to solve the matter. The system identifies four main types of demands: consultation, complaint, suggestion, and emergency. Additionally, it organizes these requests into three hierarchical levels of specificity. At the highest level, there are 41 categories encompassing areas such as market management, environmental protection, property management, recycling, and epidemic prevention. These are further subdivided into 435 more specific categories at the second level. At the most granular third level, hotline staffers can choose from 2,245 categories when entering requests into the system (BMGASA, 2022).

These categories of complaints and tasks are allocated to specific municipal, district, and township departments. Often, multiple actors are tasked with resolving an issue. For instance, bike-sharing issues typically involve the Municipal Traffic Management Bureau and the Public Security Bureau, which then coordinate with district-level bureaus. As per Article 14 of the Beijing Regulations on Receiving and Swiftly Handling Complaints, the department first assigned with a task is responsible for its timely resolution and for leading the coordination among other units in case more than one is involved. Should there be a delay in completing the task within the set timeframe, the reasons must be clearly articulated (Beijing Government, 2021). To avoid additional workload from requests, unit representatives negotiate with the district urban management command center to assign requests to other units. To prevent such “time-consuming” negotiations and further clarify responsibilities, our interviewee reports that the municipal government is constantly refining the classification of tasks (Interview with a department head at the Citizen's Hotline Service Center on September 3, 2021).

Based on the nature of the request, either the system automatically or the hotline operator assesses its urgency level in line with a categorization established by the hotline service center. Requests classified as “sudden, collective, and extreme” are immediately escalated to the public security bureau and the local party committee. These authorities must promptly dispatch representatives to the site, resolve the issue, and submit a report within two hours of receiving the initial request. Issues related to water, electricity, gas, and heating services must be resolved within 24 hours, with a final report due one day after the request is received. All other types of requests must be addressed within a seven-day timeframe. More intricate issues requiring coordination across multiple departments are allotted a 15-day deadline, extendable to 30 days when the issue's complexity warrants additional time (Beijing Government, 2021). Those cases not handled within this timeframe become pending cases, reflecting poorly not only on the responsible department tasked with resolving the case but also on higher levels, who are supposed to help if the first responsible unit cannot solve the issue.

Pending cases are linked to a key issue highlighted by our sources regarding *Jiesu Jiban*: the prevalence of “unreasonable requests.” These encompass resolved cases disputed by complainants, administrative mediation cases, and demands conflicting with policies, such as challenges to school admissions or illegal construction demolitions (Interview with a department head at the Citizen's Hotline Service Center on September 3, 2021). The latter has become a prominent issue of contention during the past decade as the city government has been demolishing mostly migrant housing in the name of creating a more “civilized” city (Huang & Yi, 2015; Tomba, 2009).

When such demands arise, hotline operators encounter difficulties comprehending demands based solely on phone conversations and provided information. Consequently, they dispatch orders, and lower levels must assess the situation. Despite potentially identifying complaints as unreasonable, lower levels must compile time-consuming reports. This results in discontent among grassroots officials as they contend with an influx of what they perceive as unreasonable requests, depleting resources, and intensifying time constraints. Additionally, when unpopular policies are enforced, *Jiesu Jiban* transfers ensuing conflicts to frontline officials. Previously, officials could dismiss “unreasonable” grievances, but now they are compelled to address forwarded requests regardless of their validity (Interview with a representative of BMGASA, February 28, 2022).

The situation is exacerbated by the daily “Resident Hotline Report,” which compiles each registered request and the targeted jurisdiction for review by the municipal party committee. It ranks the top 10 streets and towns by request volume, noting ascents in red and descents in green from the previous day. For instance, on February 23, 2019, Huilongguan Town received the most requests, climbing two positions compared to the previous day, with 29 requests. Sun Palace Residential Area ranked second with 26 requests, ascending 20 spots from February 22. In contrast, Yongshun Town, with 21 requests, dropped from the top position to sixth place. Tongzhou District accounted for 30 percent of the day's total complaints (BMGASA, 2019). A township-level official from a high-request area reflects on this situation as follows (Interview, 2 August 2022):

We recently ranked among the top ten townships in the entire city. Because of this, our town party secretary had to have meetings with the district organization department, the district discipline inspection commission, and the municipal organization department. Every month, we handle around 600 cases, with most of them related to urban issues such as parking, neighborhood disputes, property management, and utility services. The demands often exceed the capacity of our frontline governance tools and abilities. Some people believe that property management standards have declined, and they are often more knowledgeable about the rules and regulations than we are. They repeatedly raise the same demands, each counted as one case, often leading to deadlocks. The responsibility for addressing these issues falls primarily on the local communities and the township level. Resolving one person's grievance often sparks more complaints from others.

Prior research on *Jiesu Jiban* has shown how increased accountability pressure by the municipal and the district levels on township-level actors prompts the latter to improve their performance (Wang & Ma, 2020, 2021). The above quote and this section have further demonstrated how, *Jiesu Jiban* controls the rhythm of frontline governance in Beijing, creating a cycle of acceleration in two ways. First, by categorizing service requests and standardizing responsibilities, the system facilitates the datafication and monitoring of frontline work. This control encourages officials to act swiftly, which can gain valuable performance points for their evaluations by quickly accepting task assignments. Responding within minutes necessitates administrators to always remain digitally

available for the system (Interview with official from the *Jiesu Jiban* Reform Office, February 28, 2022). At the same time, this increase in standardization also creates the expectation on the municipal level of swifter action by lower levels because of the assumed reduction in time-consuming negotiations or decision-making, the latter of which has been moved upwards to the municipal level.

Second, residents' responses to the system also contribute to acceleration. Resolving one request prompts more residents to use the hotline, escalating the workload for frontline officials and the required speed in addressing each request. Additionally, residents are becoming more adept at navigating the system, framing their complaints to automatically trigger urgency (Interview with street committee cadre, August 2, 2022).

5. Analyzing the present to influence the future

The Resident Hotline Report serves dual purposes: it aids municipal leadership in tracking overall request trends and uncovers spatiotemporal patterns among requests for informed decision-making. For instance, in analyzing data from one district in the first half of 2022, the Municipal Government Affairs Administration found that requests related to the national-level civilized city policy constituted 7% of total requests but had a disproportionately high rate of unsatisfactory resolutions (15%). Peaks were also noted in requests, particularly around significant events like Chinese New Year and construction projects. Through detailed analysis and topic modeling, the municipality seeks to understand request trends and anticipate potential social instability.

Apart from informing decision-making in the present, request data analysis is used to preemptively address future requests. Until 2021, the municipal government received more than 31 million citizen requests through various *Jiesu Jiban* channels (Xinhua, 2021). Analyzing these requests made the government affairs administration aware of frequently filed requests, resulting in an update of *Jiesu Jiban*, referred to as “governing proactively, handling requests before they are launched.” This policy innovation involves investigating and resolving a set of problems within a thematic area each month. The reform aims to address 12 broad themes covering 27 specific problems annually, starting in 2021. The government aims to tackle multiple issues simultaneously by identifying overarching themes studied each month, prioritizing the most frequently reported and complex problems, which may necessitate municipal-level policy reforms (Sun & Ren, 2021).

For example, in 2021, the problem of lacking or broken street lamps in Beijing was among the first issues to be addressed by the city government throughout that year (Sun & Ren, 2021). In the table provided to us by staff members of Beijing's government affairs department, responsibilities are differentiated between the street/town, district, and municipal levels. Responsible functional departments are listed for the district and the municipal level, designating one department that takes the project lead and seven departments that have to cooperate in the process, such as Housing and Urban–Rural Development, Water Resources, and Transport. The proposed path for each department is displayed in the decision tree that begins with two dimensions of the problem to be addressed, namely, “street lamps that do not work” and “streets without lamps,” and ends with the solution of the problem, namely “work completed, shining lamps” (see Fig. 6). In early 2021 alone, according to official reports, the government and other public actors concluded more than 600 tasks and reformed or issued more than 100 policies to solve identified issues (Beijing Youth Daily, 2022).

Hence, apart from addressing regular *Jiesu Jiban* requests, local officials must deal with these additional tasks that the municipal government has identified based on the request data analysis. This is in line with Barbehön's (2022, p. 308) argument on the acceleration caused by big data tools, which “in [their] attempt to grasp ‘everything’, [...] ultimately increase complexity by revealing that time is always too scarce to do justice to all the available information [...]. In this sense, big data construe an enduring present in which there is never enough time to plan for everything” (highlight in original). At the same time, such standardized work procedures also cause acceleration by guiding cadres' decisions in very narrow paths of appropriateness, seeking to eliminate ambiguities.

6. Conclusion

This article has highlighted the importance that temporal characteristics play in *Jiesu Jiban*. Prior research has shown how policymaking is relocated to faster decision-making systems in response to increasing complexity and

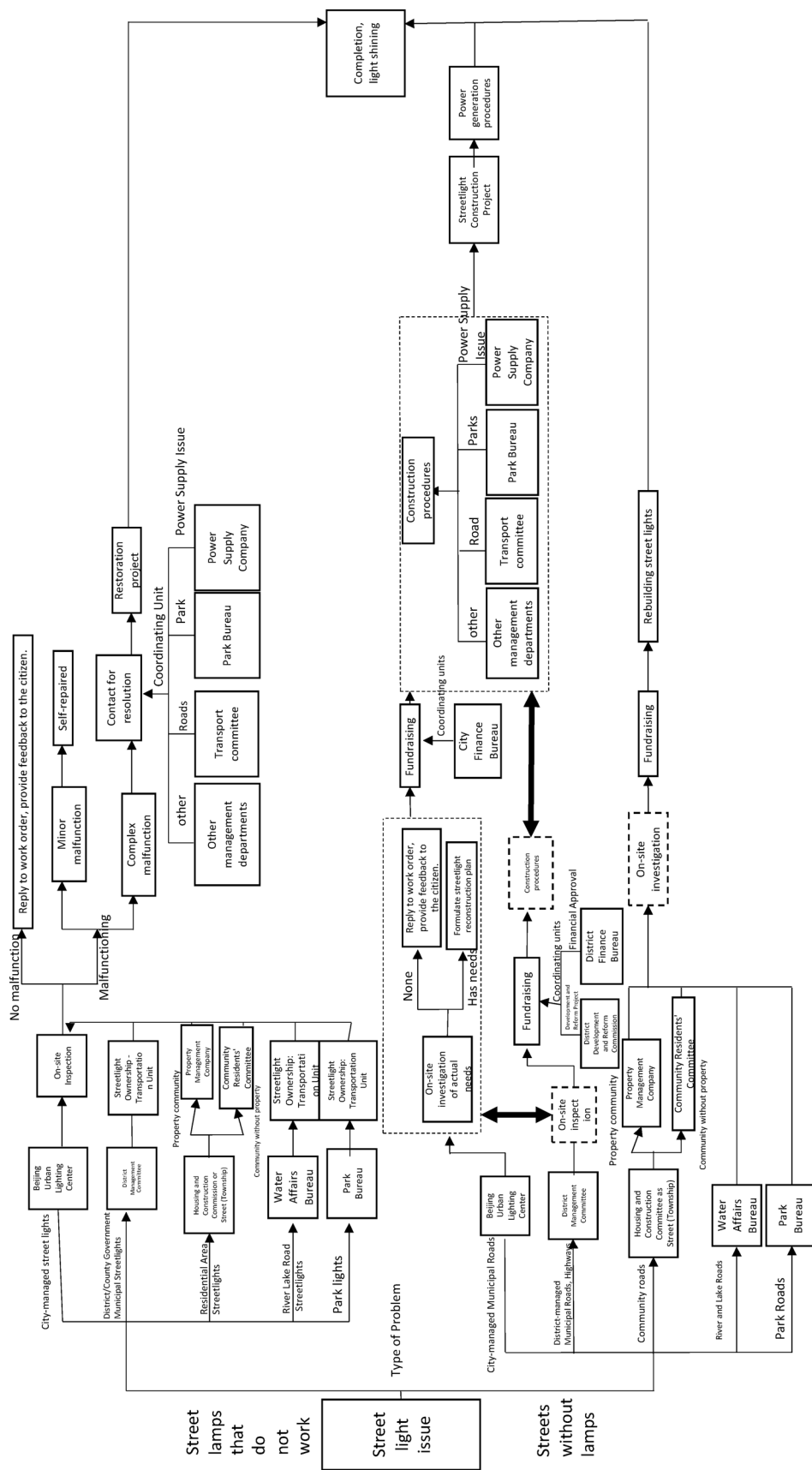


Figure 6 Decision tree of the process of solving the streetlamp problem. Source: Unpublished work report of BMGASA (2021). Published with permission.

related scarcity of time (Rosa & Trejo-Mathys, 2013). *Jiesu Jiban* represents a system designed to expedite decision-making processes, yet paradoxically, it also generates a need for speed. For policymakers, the sheer volume of requests creates the need for ever more data collection, standardization, and increasingly sophisticated data analysis, caused by the fear of not identifying and addressing a potential risk (Barbehön, 2022). Distelhorst and Hou's (2017) study of the mayor's mailbox illustrates that residents must perceive their requests as adequately addressed to sustain data flow to the state; otherwise, they may cease submitting requests. Consequently, the Beijing government mandates prompt and satisfactory handling of requests to maintain its datafication regime.

Although adapted from the U.S.'s 311 system, compared to its democratic counterpart, *Jiesu Jiban* benefits from China's authoritarian system in ensuring speedy implementation. First, because of local officials' upward accountability as part of the target responsibility system, higher levels ensure that local officials stick to stipulated timelines. Second, the introduction of the "rule of first responder" within *Jiesu Jiban* aims to expedite response times and deter task avoidance. However, according to some of our interviewees, this rule conflicts with administrative law, demonstrating the flexibility of China's authoritarian system in circumventing legal regulations, a characteristic less common in countries with stronger rule of law. Future research should nevertheless explore the commonalities and differences of digital request systems across regime types (see also Kostka & Bogs, 2024).

On the one hand, such acceleration is useful for China's one-party regime. It allows China's political system to quickly mobilize its administrative bureaucracy and respond to proclaimed crises or work toward policy targets deemed of national importance. This may result in the construction of a hospital within just six days (Williams, 2020), or the claimed alleviation of absolute poverty of more than 80 million rural residents within just eight years (Cai & Tang, 2023; Tsai & Liao, 2020). By measuring and publicizing each instance of successful request resolution, *Jiesu Jiban* allows the regime to swiftly share positive results. While shielded from wider scrutiny due to strict information control, such publicity is crucial for maintaining the performance legitimacy of the country's one-party rule. More broadly, *Jiesu Jiban* attempts to align frontline officials in China with higher-level policies and introduce specific policy implementation parameters (i.e., swiftly according to certain deadlines, in line with previously defined decision paths). With this, the system can professionalize regime responsiveness and increase the accountability of frontline officials who have often been censured for prioritizing personal interests over those of their constituents (e.g., Hillman, 2010; Ma, 2021a; O'Brien & Li, 1999) while shielding the central party-state from accountability (Dickson, 2021).

On the other hand, *Jiesu Jiban* poses the risk of promoting compliance at the expense of independent decision-making among frontline cadres. Gupta et al. (2012) argue that standardization decontextualizes, simplifies, and disempowers frontline actors. We show that the digitalized monitoring of frontline actors amplifies this process. The strict enforcement of Zero-COVID policies highlights how *Jiesu Jiban*, as a centralized control mechanism, may result in unquestioned compliance to mandates from higher authorities—even if only on paper. This trend is particularly pertinent during political campaigns that cause similar acceleration dynamics in the political system (Wang, 2018). In that way, *Jiesu Jiban* resembles political campaigns. Yet, while political campaigns have a clear beginning and end, focusing on a single, mostly quantified goal, *Jiesu Jiban* has no clear ending but is only working toward an uncertain future of a livable Beijing and (in the eyes of frontline officials) hopefully fewer requests. Moreover, as indicated by prior research on the Chinese health code, automated decision-making tools are prone to misuse by local officials (Yu & Zeuthen, 2023). Further research should investigate to what extent frontline officials utilize *Jiesu Jiban* to pursue personal interests and the potentially adverse consequences this may have for residents in Beijing, either due to individual actions or systemic issues.

This article has examined the case of Beijing. Future research should extend to exploring how the phenomenon of acceleration affects local officials in other Chinese cities employing similar hotline systems. Our findings indicate that the Beijing case stands out due to its unique approach; currently, it is the sole city in China that aggregates hotline data at the municipal level—in Beijing's case, one tier below the central government—and subsequently ranks and evaluates various streets and towns, directly impacting the advancement of frontline officials. Unlike Beijing, government service management bureaus in other regions lack such extensive authority, making it more challenging to pressure frontline officials. Nevertheless, China's central party-state organs have urged other cities in China to study Beijing's experience (Xinhua, 2024). With Hohhot in Inner Mongolia being the first

to replicate Beijing's system (Hohhot Government, 2023), likely, *Jiesu Jiban* will soon spread to other urban regions.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Endnotes

- ¹ Urban township-level units comprise streets and towns. Towns originate from the conversion of rural areas and may still include agricultural populations, and streets are purely urban areas. In Beijing and other Chinese cities, there are both rural and urban township-level units. Therefore, this paper uses both terms, depending on the specific jurisdiction being examined.
- ² WeChat is a multipurpose messaging, social media, and mobile payment app widely used in China.

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