

Digital Governance in China: Dispute Settlement and Stability Maintenance in the Digital Age

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Drawing on intensive fieldwork conducted in China from 2019 to 2022, this article argues that the Chinese Communist Party under Xi Jinping's rule is now widely applying a mode of digital governance to contain social grievances and strengthen social stability. Although digital technology itself does help facilitate dispute resolution and stability maintenance by more effectively defusing collective actions and preventing/settling social disputes, the political system and power structure under authoritarianism, to a larger extent, shapes and affects the operation and outcome of digital governance. Despite that the party-state is committed to rule by law and promoting a digital governance "by law and policy," the "state of exception" is deployed when it has to rely on digital governance "beyond law and policy" in order to serve the necessity of consolidating its political power and ruling base when social stability is threatened. However, this not only fails to construct an accountable state image but would lead to counterproductive outcomes. The study of digital governance in China adds new elements to the explanation of the condition for a "state of exception" in authoritarian states such as China and also answers why the Chinese government tries to prevent and settle disputes while keeping creating them in the digital age.

Keywords: Digital governance, digital technology, dispute resolution, stability maintenance, China



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