How the Chinese Communist Party Manages the Bureaucracy:
The Case for Rethinking the Role of Information Technology and Good Governance
By Zhen Wang

In November 2021, during a routine inspection of drunk driving in Nanchang, the capital city of Jiangxi province, a woman driving a Maserati was stopped on suspicion of drunk driving. She refused to cooperate with an alcohol test and after sixty-six invalid tests she repeatedly told a traffic police officer to "ask Yu Wei to come over" and tried to make a phone call. The officer stopped her from calling and said to her: "It's useless to call anyone. Do not call for anyone. This is being recorded and live streamed; the whole country is watching you. Any name you mention you are doing harm to this person. … If you still consider your friend a friend, you'd better cooperate with the test."[1]

This event quickly went viral on China's social media drawing more than 500 million views and generated a heated online debate. But the center of the debate was not on the unruly woman or her luxury car, but the traffic police officer—some praised the officer for doing the right thing while others criticized him as potentially covering up for some important government official because the director of a local district public security bureau happened to be named Yu Wei and was the boss of the police officer.

November 2021 Nanchang drunk driving incident. Source: *Shine.cn* at https://tinyurl.com/yszraw3m.

Triggered by the debate, local authorities launched a rapid investigation into the situation and soon announced the verdict: six Yu Weis were identified but none of them was found to have known the woman or associated with the incident. Even the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, the top anticorruption watchdog of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP or the Party), issued a commentary on its website condemning the woman for attempting to use relationships and privileges to evade laws but applauding the police officer for having prevented the woman from doing just that. The woman eventually received a sentence of two-months detention and a fine of 10,000 yuan (about US $1,500). As of the time of writing, Nanchang's once routine live-streaming of drunk-driving policing has been put on hold.

It is difficult to verify the truth of the official verdict, but what happened in Nanchang offers a glimpse of the Chinese government's sustained effort to experiment with and incorporate technology to manage civil servants and their delivery of public services. This wide-range effort from monitoring daily attendance to gauging routine job performance, for example, has often helped boost the government's administrative capacity and strengthen the ruling legitimacy of the Party. But as the Chinese society grows richer and citizens demand more transparency and accountability, this technology-enabled approach to obtaining legitimacy is destined to reach its limits. Drawing on data culled from my many years of field research in China, this article examines the complexities of this little-discussed Chinese experience and provides important insights on how all governments, regardless of regime type, should rethink the role of technologies in improving governance at a time of extraordinary challenges.

The Party and the Bureaucracy 101

Some clarification about the CCP and the Chinese bureaucracy is in order before proceeding. The current regime in China has been ruled, exclusively and uninterruptedly, by the Chinese Communist Party since 1949. This explains why the regime is often referred to as a "party state," a "one-party state," or a "Leninist party-state" that denotes the organizational and ideological influence from the former Soviet Union. Since its economic reform four decades ago, the country has largely abandoned the orthodox Soviet approach of a command economy where every economic decision is made by the state, and instead adopted a dynamic capitalist economy and embraced the global market. However, the Communist Party's political monopoly in the country remains intact and unchallenged, and it continues to be the dominant power in all important decision-makings of every aspect of the state and society.

Not surprisingly, the CCP's absolute political control also encompasses the bureaucracy, meaning that there is no meaningful separation between the Party and public administration—the fundamental nature of the Chinese bureaucracy that distinguishes it from Western ones. Specifically, the CCP controls the bureaucracy, as in any other sectors of the state and society, by staffing government jobs (especially important ones) with party members at all administrative levels. For example, the Premier at the central government is also a top party member; even at the most grassroots level, the position of village chiefs is more often than not filled by CCP members.

An important concept to understanding the Party and the bureaucracy is the Chinese word "cadre." Originally a French word, "cadre" is loosely used nowadays to refer to any individual who works in the country's vast and diverse public sector. This ranges from party organs to government organizations, the military, state-owned enterprises, public-service units, such as universities, research institutes, and hospitals, and mass organizations (such as the All-China Women's Federation, All-China Federation of Trade Unions, and Red Cross Society of China). Oftentimes, various adjectives are attached to the word "cadre" to describe officials of different political ranks along the bureaucratic hierarchy and hence of different power and influence. Some such common terms include "leading/elite/high-ranking cadres," "ordinary/average/lower-level cadres,", and "grassroots cadres." Again, as CCP's effective control reaches deep into the state and society, cadres are usually expected to be party members.[2] When translated into English, this Chinese word "cadre" is often used interchangeably with the word "official" and I will do the same in this article, unless specified otherwise.

Monitoring Presence

While the COVID-19 pandemic has led many people in the West to work from home, it has created little disruption to the traditional work life in China. Government employees are expected, as they always have been, to be physically present in the office to fulfill their job responsibilities. To curtail absenteeism and tardiness, many local governments have tapped into information technology to track their

employees' attendance. When doing field research at a municipal government bureau, I noticed that employees were checking in and out by the entrance through a facial-recognition gadget. Surprisingly, none of them seemed even slightly bothered by the surveillance or concerned about personal privacy. When probed by me, they expressed appreciation for the convenience, accuracy, and fairness of the technology compared to the traditional record keeping system that was slow and often unreliable in terms of capturing and preserving attendance data. As an official joked, "Nowadays, it's impossible to have your colleague sign in for you."[3] This suggests that the artificial intelligence-enabled technology has been not only accepted but even welcomed by the bureau employees because it helps prevent false reporting, fabrication, and favoritism.

Evaluating Performance

Local governments also experiment with technologies to reinvent the tools to better capture, record, and assess the performance of civil servants; the performance data is then incorporated into the decision-making about their financial bonuses or career prospects. The ultimate goal is to boost bureaucratic performance, making sure that bureaucrats not only just show up at the office every day but actually do their jobs.

Every local government in China, regardless of administrative level or locale, employs a cadre performance evaluation system (PES), though the specifics of evaluation content and procedure vary across jurisdictions as a result of catering to local conditions. Traditionally, however, the PES is only meaningful to a tiny subset of the mammoth bureaucratic corps—leading cadres (i.e., the party boss and government head along with some key cadres of certain political ranks in any given jurisdiction). In other words, although all public employees at the local levels are subject to evaluations, only the leading officials are held accountable to their upper-level government for their performance evaluation results; in contrast, the evaluations are largely a formality for ordinary civil servants that have little consequence on their economic welfare or political career.[4]

This differential treatment of cadres is often touted as the CCP's selective-control strategy in personnel management after Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms, but it is also derived out of necessity simply because conducting meaningful evaluations of everyone on the state payroll is too financially prohibitive and logistically burdensome for local governments.

Unfortunately, the necessity-oriented approach comes with a serious cost: it has contributed to a widespread problem of bureaucratic inertia, as the rank and file of the Party are not held responsible for the evaluation results and thus lack the drive to perform their duties. This problem has become so pressing that it was openly acknowledged by Xi Jinping himself during a talk with high-level party officials, "…there exist now many complex issues among cadres, and one conspicuous problem is that some cadres have felt increasingly confused, lack enthusiasm, and have demonstrated a certain degree of 'unwillingness to perform duties.'"[5] And the Party sees this problem as a threat to "the legitimacy of the government, the image of party cadres, the grand plans of reform and development, building a comprehensive moderately prosperous society, and even fulfilling the great 'Chinese Dream.'"[6]

Xi Jinping delivers a speech marking the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party. Source: Screenshot from the *BBC News* report on YouTube at https://tinyurl.com/k7jfc82f.

Now, thanks to technology, local governments are able to circumvent the financial and logistical constraints and transform the selective PES regime into an all-encompassing one. Web portals, for example, have been widely deployed to streamline the evaluation process, increase its efficiency, equity, and transparency, and therefore allow local governments to conduct realistic performance assessments of every single public employee.

In 2013, a city in Hubei province started a pilot project with a web portal where all state employees, regardless of official position or political rank, were registered and required to record their work every single day. A year later the portal was officially adopted into the local PES regime and implemented from the city down to its subordinate counties and townships.[7] To facilitate the implementation process, the city government issued a manual on the functions of the portal and how to navigate it. Reading through the manual, one can clearly see how this new evaluation system distinguishes itself from previous ones.

Most importantly, the fully computerized portal automatically generates a final score for every employee once various results of individual evaluation items are entered by a multitude of departments and officials charged with conducting the evaluations. Traditionally, the cumbersome process of reporting, tallying up various results, calculating and distributing the final scores took up so much time and effort that such a comprehensive evaluation was conducted only once a year. But nowadays, since the web portal has drastically reduced the labor involved in the evaluation process, local cadres are assessed every two months. The increase in evaluation frequency is likely to keep cadres more attentive to their job performance.

Moreover, the computerized system enforces a strict assessment timeline. All cadres must fill out a daily log on what they have done for the day, and after a certain date they will be blocked from making either new entries or changes to existing ones. This means that officials must perform their duties regularly and consistently to achieve a good evaluation result. Compared to the traditional once-a-year PES where a final score revealed little about whether and how well cadres actually had done their job on a routine basis, this new evaluation method of constant pressure is more likely to produce diligent civil servants hard at work every day.

Furthermore, the portal is engineered in ways to curb the influence of traditional Chinese values, such as maintaining relationships, reciprocity, and harmony, that tend to skew evaluation results. For instance, every cadre can only view his or her final calculated score, without being able to see the original individual points assigned by officials charged with evaluating certain areas of work. This feature is designed

An image of the app *Xuexi Qiangguo*. Source: *Boing Boing* at https://tinyurl.com/4k7v8xvy.

to free officials from concerns about offending those who are being evaluated and therefore makes the evaluation process as confidential and objective as possible. Similarly, the system caps the number of cadres who can be classified as "excellent," the highest level of performance evaluation result and is rewarded with the largest sum of monetary bonuses and the most consideration for promotion. The purpose is to break the old habit in Chinese workplace culture to give everyone a good score regardless of actual performance for the sake of avoiding conflict and preserving cohesiveness, and instead differentiate cadres by how well they have done their job.

In addition to the web portal, in 2019 the same municipal government incorporated WeChat (the most popular mobile super-app in China that incorporates numerous functions from instant messaging to hailing a cab to taking out a loan) in its PES regime to further help distribute evaluation paperwork more efficiently and advance towards digital management of civil servants. In 2020, the government started using WeChat to assess public perception of the performance of municipal functional departments and subordinate townships. Specifically, any person, local or global, can cast a vote among five choices—"very satisfied," "satisfied," "average," "not satisfied," and "not applicable"—as long as they have access to the app.[8]

Whether and to what extent the technology-enhanced evaluation methods accurately capture and measure performance is certainly up for debate, but it is safe to say that overall, embracing technology has made it financially and logistically possible for local governments to evaluate the work performance of all public employees, not just the leading cadres, and thus incentivize them to be dedicated to their job responsibilities.

Training Cadres

The Party strives to innovate its toolkit of cadre training to stay technologically relevant. When conducting interviews at a municipal bureau in Hubei during summer 2019, I noticed that the bureau officials were studying and taking tests on their smartphones through an app called *xuexi qiangguo*, literally translated as "study to strengthen the nation."[9] The test questions cover a vast array of subjects, ranging from history to literature, science, and current affairs. Many of the questions are so trivial that I had no clue about answers. As my interviewee complained with a forced smile, "the design [of the app] is too much; the questions are too difficult. All this is not to let people idle."[10]

In addition to the *xuexi qiangguo* study app used nationwide, provincial governments have also created their own cadre training platforms. For instance, Hubei has designated an online portal for all of its civil servants.[11] Every official is required to complete at least fifty hours of study per year, including a minimum of twenty-five hours for required courses; courses vary depending on the political rank of officials. As often depicted by Western media, these training programs are designed to ensure that cadres toe the party line through indoctrination study tasks, which could be so mind-numbing and time-consuming that they end up being grudgingly performed as a bureaucratic chore. Indeed, my interviewee was so caught up in his work that he let me take the courses on his behalf during lunch break. Afterward, he happily informed me that I had helped him fulfill more than two hours of study time.

Yet the technology-enabled training programs have made the indoctrination process more nuanced than commonly depicted. As several bureau officials gathered together in my interviewee's office, the *xuexi qiangguo* study app became the center of conversation: they were discussing the test questions, especially the ones they missed, how much they scored, and what their score rankings were (both among their bureau colleagues and among all civil servants nationally). The conversation was spirited and everyone seemed genuinely engaged and cheerful. When an official said he ranked beyond a millionth nationally, I commented: "then you must belong to the very few bottom ones [nationally]." "Not necessarily," the official responded defiantly, "think about it, there are ninety million party members, so what does it mean for a million something out of ninety million?"[12]

This snapshot of the office scene centering on the study app suggests that the cadre training platform operates with a built-in mechanism incorporating elements of competition, socialization, and even fun. Though subtle, this mechanism helps incentivize officials to complete the otherwise tedious tasks and, more importantly, foster a shared identity within the bureaucracy and strengthen cadre bond and morale. So, technology has transformed the traditionally mechanical cadre training programs into a more sophisticated indoctrination apparatus.

Engaging the Public

Live-streaming has become a popular tool of governance in recent years. It is typically used to increase public oversight of services provided by street-level bureaucrats, as exemplified by the policing process during the Nanchang drunk driving incident. Even party elites

are increasingly asked to participate in live-streaming events for various purposes. As part of a provincial-wide campaign to revive the economy after the two-month-long lockdown in Wuhan and its neighboring cities in early 2020, senior officials in Hubei province turned themselves into live-streaming influencers to endorse local brands and promote sales. Li Qiang, the then deputy mayor of Wuhan, though feeling nervous spoke highly of Zhou Hei Ya, a chain company originated in Wuhan that sells local delicacies like braised duck feet and necks.[13]

Other than promoting economic growth, live-streaming technology has been integrated by local governments into the process of evaluating the work performance of leading cadres. A county of Hubei province, for example, since 2014 started to require the heads of its functional departments as well as the party secretary and government head of its subordinate townships to orally present the highlights of their work (i.e., greatest accomplishments) for the year during the last weekend of December, and worst of all, the entire process is televised live. During the two-day ordeal, these cadres are organized into different groups based on the nature of their positions. That is, heads of functional departments are in one group, township party secretaries in one group, and township heads in another. Then the groups take turns to present. The presentations must utilize PowerPoint slides and are capped to five minutes. Cadres are notified ten seconds before the time limit and the microphone will be turned off if presentations go overtime. Once each group finishes all its individual presentations, the county's leading cadres along with other major officials evaluate and rank the presentations based on a certain formula and results are announced right away. This means that cadres are openly compared to their counterparts within each group in front of their immediate upper-level bosses, peers from parallel jurisdictions, and anyone who cares to tune in. Unsurprisingly, this newly invented practice has imposed an enormous amount of stress on leading cadres, and is designed to motivate them to increase work performance by resorting to their inherent desire to outcompete peers and to not lose face. As one township government head once said to me, "This [referring to the practice] is a way to give cadres a hard time; it's almost killing cadres."[14]

Local governments also demand elite officials to interact with citizens through live-streaming platforms. The usual format is for the leading bureaucrats in charge of a certain area of work to address questions or complaints from the audience on issues of common concern, from demolitions to site selection for public restrooms. This practice is created to put pressure on elite officials so as to improve their performance and win public approval of local government policies. But when things do not go as expected, like the Nanchang incident, the instantaneous nature of live-streaming can be a reputation nightmare for local governments and many officials have fallen victim to this practice. In August 2021, during a live broadcast event organized by the Gansu provincial government where officials were supposed to discuss issues on tourism management with netizens, two officials from a municipal tourism administration bureau caught national attention and drew heavy criticism—one found to be dozing off and the other playing with cell phone—and they were later disciplined by local authorities.[15]

Cadres at *Xinhua News* attend a Nineteenth Party Congress study session. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at https://tinyurl.com/2p8wydxp.

Governing With Technology, China and the Rest of the World

Tasked with a mammoth bureaucracy, the CCP faces the challenge of managing its massive cadre corps on a daily basis. Embracing technology in areas like attendance monitoring, performance evaluation, professional training, and public outreach has enabled the CCP to augment bureaucratic competence, accountability and transparency as well as compliance with party policies.

This little-told story diverges from the mainstream narrative on the impact of information technologies on democracy, which tends to view information technologies as eroding the ideals of liberty and equality and susceptible to totalitarian control, not to mention when they are employed by authoritarian regimes where the check on government authority is fragile. A telling example of this critical narrative is the recent decision by Facebook to shut down its facial recognition system amid growing pressures from government regulators and societal concerns about the use of this technology. But the China story suggests that even in a single-party state, the CCP's technology-facilitated management of the bureaucracy often involves empowering ordinary citizens to help rein in its civil servants in order to improve administrative efficiency and governing legitimacy.

However, the technology-assisted process of pursing governing legitimacy in a one-party state is also plagued by an inherent dilemma. The Party must tap into the power of technology to cultivate a responsive and competent bureaucracy to meet the demands of the Chinese society that is increasingly economically diverse and technologically sophisticated. But, as technology-empowered citizens call for more transparency and accountability, it can pose a threat to the Party's authoritarian rule. As the Nanchang incident well illustrates, whenever a practice has the slightest potential of challenging the government legitimacy, it will be halted (forget that live-streaming of policing drunk driving has increased transparency and accountability in public service provision). Unless serious political reform is carried out, there is no easy solution to this dilemma and the struggle to balance the two competing forces to govern a changing China will perpetually haunt the CCP.

What broader implications for the rest of the world can be drawn from the Chinese experience? One is the need to drop the singular narrative about information technologies. The nature of any technology, high and low, is multifaceted—other than a potential threat to individual privacy and liberty, it can also be utilized to boost government performance, transparency and accountability, thus strengthening legitimacy. This multifaceted nature of technology applies to any regimes, be they democracies or authoritarian governments. As the Chinese experience indicates, though not subjected to competitive elections, the one-party state is still under immense pressure to hold its bureaucrats

accountable for their performances and actions to citizens, and technologies help the state do just that, which in turn consolidates the Party's rule. Likewise, how technology is used in routine training programs to cultivate and socialize China's civil servants signals that even in an autocracy the role of technology is much more than just surveillance control and repression, an imagery often associated with George Orwell's *1984*. The relationship between the party state and its rank-and-file bureaucrats, upon whom the technology is deployed, is not necessarily antagonistic. This suggests governments might need to recognize the complexity of utilizing technology for better productivity and get creative in taking advantage of its benefits.

Grasping the multifaceted nature of technology is crucial in today's world when all governments are battling the extraordinary challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change. Whether a government can overcome such challenges not only determines its political legitimacy, but more importantly, the long-term survival of the nation. So, no government can afford to squander the opportunities provided by information technology to help tackle extraordinary challenges. Certainly, unchecked power of any sort, technology included, is a risk to liberty and democracy; but instead of "throwing the baby out with the bathwater," governments should ensure that rigorous regulations are in place to minimize that risk.

Another major implication is that autocracies like China do not possess a systemic edge over democracies in utilizing information technologies to improve administrative efficiency and governing capacity. While many argue that information technology like artificial intelligence is more likely to thrive under tyranny unimpeded by privacy concerns, the actual Chinese experience suggests that the presumed prowess of the Chinese government and, more broadly, the advantage of an authoritarian state is much overstated. As discussed, the CCP has been beset by the dilemma—the need of deploying technology to accommodate an increasingly sophisticated society. Doing so also raises public expectations on government accountability and transparency and hence challenges one-party rule. Although liberal democracies must endure the arduous consensus-building process among many stakeholders, autocracies face problems of their own that severely hinder their ability to make the most of technology's potential for good governance. In other words, no government, regardless of regime type, has it easy in governing with technology, especially in the era of pandemic and climate change. Equally, authoritarianism is certainly no solution for the troubles facing democracies at home.

NOTES

1. For an English version of the news report, see Manfeng Zhao, "It's No Use Calling Anyone Before the Law," *China Daily*, November 10, 2021, https://tinyurl.com/2p93scb7.
2. For further reading on the Party and the bureaucracy, see Sebastian Heilmann, Lea Shih, and Sandra Heep, "The Chinese Communist Party and State Institutions," in *China's Political System*, ed. Sebastian Heilmann (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 46–152.
3. Interview with a municipal official, Hubei, May, 23, 2019.
4. For a good introduction on the PES and its selective feature, see Maria Edin, "Remaking the Communist Party-State: The Cadre Responsibility System at the Local Level in China," *China: An International Journal* 1, no. 1 (2003): 1–15.
5. Xi Jinping, "Talk Given at the Special Topic Discussion Class for Provincial and Ministerial Level Leading Officials to Learn and Implement the Spirit of the Fifth Plenary Session of the Eighteenth CPC Central Committee," *Xinhua News Agency*, May 10, 2016, https://tinyurl.com/3ww5hzwm.
6. Yuanhua Xu, "Why Bother be a Cadre if Not Performing Duties While at it?" *People's Daily*, June 7, 2016, http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0607/c1003-28416111.html
7. The web portal is located at http://www.jikaowang.com/.
8. I, for example, though living in the United States, was called on to vote via the WeChat app by a local government official.
9. Diverging from the literal translation, Western popular media also interprets the app name as "Study Xi [Jinping] and Strengthen the Nation" because the Chinese word for study—"xuexi"—contains the current president's family name. See Anna Fifield, "Chinese App on Xi's Ideology Allows Data Access to Users' Phones, Report Says," *The Washington Post*, October 12, 2019, https://tinyurl.com/vp8wjjuu.
10. Interview with a municipal official, Hubei, May 23, 2019.
11. The web portal is located at http://www.hbgbzx.gov.cn/.
12. Interview with a municipal official, Hubei, May 23, 2019.
13. For an English version of the News Report, see Vincent Ni and Yitsing Wang, "Coronavirus: Can Live-Streaming Save China's Economy?" *BBC*, May 6, 2020, https://tinyurl.com/yddvjbk6.
14. Interview with a township official, Hubei, June 16, 2016.
15. "Female Official Dozes Off, Male Official Plays with Cellphone, Q&A Live Broadcast Too Embarrassing," *Sohu*, August 13, 2021, https://www.sohu.com/a/483190209_120728771.

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