

Decentralisation and its impacts on disability service delivery in China: an example of providing accessible government websites¹

Biao He (University of Tartu, Estonia)

Rune Halvorsen (Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway)

Peng Ding and Wanhong Zhang (Wuhan University, China)

Abstract

Different from other countries in the global South, China has never been occupied and has maintained its own governance system with its own bureaucratic structures and institutions. Yet, China has undergone several changes in its governance structure. Under the waves of neoliberalism diffused from the global North, China and other countries in the global South have adopted decentralisation reforms since the 1980s as a policy tool to drive economic development, improve administrative management and enhance public service provision. In a Western context, decentralization has been conceptualized as an institutional feature of liberal democracy. The idea has been that local autonomy and self-governance foster more meaningful political participation by the citizens and more bespoke social services accommodated to local needs. Given this historical development of the concept in the global North, we ask what “decentralization” involves and means in a Chinese context. More specifically we examine how the Chinese version of decentralization affect the provision of disability services.

Our comparative case study of the implementation of policies to ensure accessible government websites in Wuhan and Shenzhen demonstrate that local disability policy implementation vary across regions. We argue that disparities in local finance and governance capability – caused by the decentralisation reforms – have made some local governments less capable to implement the national ambitions. While some local governments are eager to adopt complementary policies and even adopt local action plans that go beyond national ambitions, others are less active. The impacts of decentralisation have made the delivery outcomes in one place differ from another and widened the inequalities in disability service provision in China. The findings have implications for our understanding of the challenges in disability service provision and mirroring the whole public service development in Chinese society since the post-1980 decentralisation reforms. It also suggests that a neoliberal policy choice imported from the Global North does not work as a quick fix for all governance ills in transit economies such as China. It may have enhanced efficiency but also caused larger regional inequalities.

In a Chinese context, “decentralization” assumes specific characteristics that differ from how the concept has been conceived in the literature in the global North. Chinese decentralization reforms have involved more financial autonomy for the provinces, delegation of responsibilities and administrative power within a one-party system without the check and balances of the arms of the government or interest group representation we associate with liberal democracies. The reforms have first and foremost been associated with ambitions of economic growth and administrative efficiency. Yet, even within a one-party system, we find different responses at the local level, varying from feet dragging, neglect and minimum implementation to eagerness to demonstrate compliance with or moving beyond the national ambitions. Future research should examine the interaction, positioning and negotiations, among civil servants and party representatives at the different levels of governance in more detail and examine the scope for feedback from and autonomy among non-governmental actors.

Keywords: decentralisation, disability policy, web accessibility, social services, China, global South

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1. Introduction

Different from other countries in the global South, China has never been occupied and has maintained its own governance system with its own bureaucratic structures and institutions. Since the communist revolution in 1949, China has undergone several changes in its governance structure. The reforms have among others involved more financial autonomy for the provinces but within a one-party system. In a Western context, decentralization has been conceptualized as an institutional feature of liberal democracy (Lijphart 1999). In the global North advocates of decentralization have argued for the principle of subsidiarity, i.e. that decisions should be taken at the lowest possible level of governance. In fact, local government itself has been considered one of the most consistent institutional features of democracies around the world. The idea has been that local autonomy and self-governance foster more meaningful political participation by the citizens and more bespoke social services accommodated to local needs (Sellers and Lidström 2007). Given this coining or framing of the concept in the global North, we may ask what “decentralization” involves and means in a Chinese context. More specifically we are interested in how the Chinese version of “decentralization” affect the provision of disability services.

Rondinelli et al. (1983) argue that the concept of decentralisation consists of many components. In his work, Rondinelli (1981) outlines a comprehensive understanding of the concept: decentralisation can be defined as the transfer of responsibilities for planning, management and resource raising and allocation from the central to its agencies to field units of central government ministries and its agencies, subordinate units or levels of government, semiautonomous public authorities or corporations, areawide, regional and functional authorities, or non-governmental private or voluntary organisation. Depending on the responsibility for and discretion in decision-making transferred from the central government, Rondinelli (1981) categorises decentralisation into four types: deconcentration, delegation, devolution, and privatisation.

Arguably, the Chinese version of “decentralization” has in particular been informed by the waves of neoliberalism adopted by Western countries. Decentralisation – understood as privatisation – started to be adopted by Western countries in the second half of the 1970s (Steger & Roy, 2010b) Rousseau & Hunt, 1986). Very soon, decentralization was diffused to the global South as an institutional innovation to cope with financial crises, declining exports, and rising prices for energy and imported goods (Jack Knight, 2001). The World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) also promoted neoliberal economic policies such as ‘Structural Adjustment Programs’ to loan-borrower countries by imposing decentralization initiatives such as removing ‘excess’ government controls and evoking market competition (United Nations, 2020).

Decentralization has been widely used to facilitate public service delivery in the global South. A theoretical assumption behind such policy choices is that decentralisation can improve the

efficiency of public service delivery through preference matching and allocative efficiency (Tiebout, 1956; Musgrave, 1959; Oates, 1972). The idea is that better access for local governments to local preferences, information, and conditions, make the local governments more capable of tailoring services to the citizens. Moreover, geographical closeness between government and citizens in a local context may foster accountability and thus improve public service outcomes, particularly in social sectors such as education and healthcare (Cantarero & Sanchez, 2006; Ahmad et al., 2008). However, a long-term debate on decentralisation reforms in the global South is how decentralization has impacted public service delivery in practice and whether the expected benefits have been achieved. Empirical evidence has suggested mixed conclusions. While some find positive effect of decentralisation on public services (Santos, 1998; Faguet, 2004), some argue that decentralisation may help little or even worsen the delivery (Crook & Sverrisson, 1999; Grindle, 2007; Ibeanusi, 2011). Additionally, even when the expectation is somewhat achieved, some cases may still face a set of challenges, e.g., quality and equity (Galasso et al., 2004).

In China, the largest economy in the global South, decentralisation reforms have dramatically changed Chinese society. Fiscal decentralisation, together with rounds of administration reforms, has strengthened the local political and economic power, triggered competition among localities, and in turn, boosted China's economic growth (Cheung, 2009). This achievement has made the Chinese decentralisation practice an exceptional example for other countries in the global South. However, despite the economic miracle, the decentralisation reforms in China have brought many "side-effects" to public service delivery. As a transition economy, China gave priority to economic growth after the "reform and opening-up" at the cost of leaving public service provision behind. As a consequence, the quality of public service delivery vary across the regions and has generated local welfare protectionism (Mok & Wu, 2013). The social tensions and inequalities caused by over-prioritising and emphasising economic growth in the 1980s and 1990s have forced China to rethink their political trajectory. As a result, China endorsed a political doctrine of building a "harmonious society" (*Hexie Shehui*) by "equalising public service delivery" (*Gonggong Fuwu Jundenghua*) in 2006 (CCCPC, 2006; Fan, 2006). However, the (negative) influence of the 1980s and 1990s' decentralisation reforms over public service delivery are still lasting today.

In broader terms, Chinese disability policy, an important social policy component of this country, has been affected by the decentralisation practices: China's decentralisation in the 1980s has partially relaxed the state's control with civil society. Public awareness of individual rights has risen, and China has adopted substantial laws and policies to enhance social rights. This state-civil society decentralisation can partially explain the emergency of disability movements and activities at the beginning of the 1980s, the founding of several disabled people's organisations, and the amendment of the *Constitute* in 1982 that promised the legal protection of rights in education, healthcare, and living for *all* disabled citizens (National People's Congress, 1982). In 1990, China passed its first disability law - the *Law on the Protection of Persons with Disabilities* (LPPD). Together with four other complementary statute administrative regulations, China has established a disability policy framework, which includes provisions covering not only income maintenance benefits (e.g., living allowance,

money transfer measures, social insurance) but also disability services in kind (e.g., rehabilitation, special education) and accessibility to the market. Inspired by the 2006 UN Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), China amended *LPPD* in 2008 and adopted *Regulations on Accessibility* in 2012, promising to provide accessible government websites and e-services to promote the full participation of persons with disabilities in the digital era.

However, it is an unanswered question how political and economic decentralisation reforms in the 1980s and 1990s have influenced the provision of disability services (see however Mok, 2013; Mok & Wu, 2013; Shen et al., 2014). Using the case of providing accessible government websites and e-services in China, this chapter contributes to fill in this gap on how the Chinese version of “decentralisation” impacts on public service provision. The next section (Section 2) reviews the evolution and patterns of Chinese decentralisation reforms and develops an analytical framework. Section 3 examines how decentralisation has influenced disability service delivery regarding local policy transfer and implementation outcomes. Section 4 discuss the findings and Section 5 concludes the chapter.

2. Decentralisation in China and its impacts on public service delivery

Decentralization in China: a “centralization-decentralization” circle

China has adopted rounds of decentralisation, or more specifically, since the founding of the new authority in 1949 (Liu, 2008). Before the 1979-reform, China was a highly centralised state (Zheng & Shan, 2009). In this regime, the central government dominated the decision-making in fiscal revenue, economy, and public administration, whilst the lower governments were required to implement the national policy accordingly with little negotiation (Liu, 2008). Most importantly, the central government had the authority in determining the local fiscal budget and spending. Being highly centralised also meant little space for the market and civil society in the command economy period (Zheng & Shan, 2009). In this period, Chinese government leaders noticed the limitation of excessive centralisation already and therefore adopted two rounds of administrative decentralisation, or more precisely, “deconcentration” during 1958-1960 and 1970-1971 (Zhao, 2005; Liu, 2006; Su, 2007); i.e. the handing over of some amount of administrative authority or responsibility to lower levels within central government ministries and agencies (Rondinelli et al., 1983). Chinese local governments were granted a certain degree of autonomy in resource distribution, infrastructure investment and construction, and employment recruitment in state-own enterprises. Nevertheless, many problems followed, such as economic chaos and increasing regional divide. As a result, local powers were repeatedly taken back to the central government in the 1961-1965 and 1972-1975 periods (Liu, 2008).

Such a “centralisation-decentralisation” circle also occurred in the post-reform era. In the 1980s, the introduction of a market economy in China triggered the post-reform decentralisation reforms (Liu, 2008). Compared to the former stage, the post-reform decentralisation has wider scopes and dual dimensions. By dual-dimension decentralisation, the state’s power has been

dispersed *within* the state (i.e., across hierarchies of governments) but also been horizontally dispersed *away* from the state (i.e., from the government to the market and civil society). Further, each dimension distinguishes political and economic decentralisation (see Fig. 1) (Zheng & Shan, 2009; Mok & Wu, 2013).

	Vertical decentralisation (i.e., across tiers of governments)	Horizontal decentralisation (i.e., from the state to market and civil society)
Economic Decentralisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing local decision-making in economy and fiscal revenue or “Local Autarky” • Local ownership of SOE • Regional competition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Privatisation and marketisation of SOE and public services • Less intervention in economic activities from the government
Political Decentralisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delegating responsibilities to local administrative authorities • Fostering local decision-making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emergence of organized civil society as service providers

Figure 1 Dual-Dimension Decentralization in the Post-Reform Period, Sources: (Zheng & Shan, 2009; Mok & Wu, 2013). SOE = state-owned enterprises

Vertically, intensive economic reforms were launched between 1979 and the mid-1990s, in which substantial authorities in planning commission, business, tax, and banking were devolved to local governments (Zheng & Shan, 2009). Local governments have become *de facto* businessmen and capitalists, so their motivation to develop local economies was boosted. A specific case is the fiscal reforms in 1980, 1985, and 1988 (Liu, 2008). This “delegating power and sharing dividends” practice strengthened the financial authority and capability as well as other general autonomies of the local governments (Xie, 2000). However, these fiscal devolutions also decreased the share of central fiscal revenue in the total national revenue from 40 to 22 per cent between 1984 and 1994 (National Bureau of Statistics, n.d.). Politically, the central government allowed the provincial governments to determine personnel appointment and removal within the judicial area, including subordinate municipalities (Zheng & Shan, 2009). As supportive measures for economic reforms, China also adopted four rounds of administrative devolution in the 1980s and 1990s to streamline government departments and agencies and clarify administrative functions between the central and local governments (Liu, 2008). Increasing fiscal revenue, political power, and administrative authorities have strengthened the local governance capability. This way, more governance and management responsibilities, such as social service delivery, have also been handed over to the local governments (Liu, 2008).

Horizontally, the state started to hand over production and distribution activities to the for-profit and not-for-profit sectors (Mok & Wu, 2013). In the mid-1990s, China initiated rounds of state-owned enterprises (SOE) reforms, attempting to marketise and privatise the middle- and small-size SOEs to reduce the fiscal burden for the governments (Chi, 2019). In 1982, the revised *Constitution* incorporated “developing and protecting individual economy” (National People's Congress, 1982), taking another step to include non-government sectors in economic

activities. In these cases, the “privatisation” form of decentralisation has been used in the Chinese context. Some government functions have been delegated to “para-state” entities that stand-alone and at some degree of arm’s length from the state’s authority (Mok & Wu, 2013). Since the 1980s, we have witnessed an increasing number of non-government organisations playing a complementary role in public service delivery (Fisher et al., 2012).

Impacts of post-reform decentralisation on public service delivery in China

This section examines the impact of post-reform decentralisation on generic public service delivery in China. In the command economy, public service delivery was underdeveloped. Public services in employment, housing, and medical care were primarily provided for groups such as employees in SOEs and soldiers. Also, such services were directly regulated by the central government (Liu, 2008). Thus, the pre-reform decentralisation changed very little the way of public service delivery in Chinese society.

However, the dual-dimension decentralisation since the 1980s has strengthened both the economic *and* administrative power of local governments. The local governments have received more responsibilities for their own economic and administrative affairs. No longer are the local governments simply implementors of the national public policy. Negotiation with the central government has become possible, given their increasing fiscal and administrative authority. Consequently, the lower-level governments have discretion and space to interpret and selectively transfer and implement the public policies from the upper-level governments based on their fiscal revenue or other factors such as development priority. Altogether, after the decentralisation, there has been a relatively clear division of labour in public service delivery across governments. In the case of education, for example, due to decentralisation, the central government retains the overall planning role. The provincial government has the overall responsibility for formulating the development plan, conducting inspections, determining operational standers, and providing assistance to counties to help them meet recurrent expenditures in education. Municipalities then are the actual policy implementors (the State Council, 1994).

Another impact concerns the outcomes of public service delivery. Scarce central fiscal caused by decentralisation made the central government re-centralise the fiscal authority in 1994 by adopting the “tax-sharing system”. Since then, taxes have been divided into three: national tax, local tax, and joint tax shared by the central and local government (the State Council, 1993). Ironically, when taking back a large part of fiscal revenue, the central government left heavy governance and management responsibilities to local governments. In 2004, sub-national governments, including provincial and especially municipal and county governments, financed 95 per cent of public spending on education, 95 per cent on health care, and 85 per cent on social security (Shen et al., 2012). Arguably, the capacity and motivation to provide good-quality public services at local government were decreased, given insufficient financial resources after the 1994’s fiscal reform. Regional inequality has become another service delivery issue caused by decentralisation (Shen et al., 2014). Compared to the inland regions, the coastal provinces shared the first piece of cake of the “reform and opening-up” policy. At first, Special Economic Zones that China established to experiment with the economic

initiatives mainly covered coastal regions such as Guangdong, Fujian, and Shanghai. Booming GDP growth has enhanced their local fiscal and political power and the capability of providing public service for their local citizens. In the meantime, the shortage of local revenue in inland regions had to limit their investment in local public services, thus worsening service delivery quantity and quality. For instance, in 2003, the average expenditure per primary school student reached 1600 Chinese Yuan (appr. 200 USD) in eastern China against 1000 Chinese Yuan in western China. The disparity in public service delivery further led to problems such as “welfare regionalism” that citizen from one municipality has no access to public services delivered by another (Mok & Wu, 2013).

From existing literature, we have observed that the post-reform decentralisation has affected public service delivery in at least two ways. *Vertically*, the central-local division of authority and responsibility has made local governments both the actual policy makers and implementors. They are allowed to interpret, transfer, and localise the national welfare policy adapting to local contexts. This institutional arrangement can increase the flexibility in building local policy framework given regional disparities, but also could give room for gaming the national policy due to local interests. In either case, a result could be ambitious national policy outlines versus limited local policy initiatives. Further, what and how local government would transfer the national policy will tightly link to the implementation outcome of public service delivery. *Horizontally*, due to the increasing local authority, the transfer of national welfare policy varies across localities. Some local governments would be more engaged in responding to the national policy initiatives than others due to, e.g., local politicians’ preferences and interests, and the socio-economic development. While affluent regions are motivated to enrich local policy framework for service delivery, underdeveloped regions may transfer the national policy by modifying or removing some articles to “meet their local context”.

It is plausible to argue that decentralisation may hamper disability service delivery in China. When local governments struggle with providing generic public services such as education and healthcare, they are very likely to squeeze the investment in social services for marginalized groups such as persons with disabilities. In this chapter, we focus on (1) the intergovernmental (central-local) disability policy transfer outcome and (2) regional disparities in disability policy transfer and service delivery outcomes. To evaluate how decentralisation has influenced disability service delivery we examine the provision of accessible government websites.

3. How has the post-reform decentralisation impacted disability service delivery in China? A case of accessible e-governance service provision

Accessibility Policy Context in China

Accessibility policy refers to initiatives aiming to reduce the barriers to accessing physical and digital environments for persons with disabilities and the elderly. Relevant policy provisions first officially appeared in Chinese disability law LPPD in 1990. In the earliest appearance, Chinese accessibility policy primarily emphasised access to the physical environment. In 2006, the United Nations adopted the Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities (CRPD), the first international disability legislation. The convention provides an encompassing

framework to foster equal opportunities for persons with disabilities and is the first to address accessibility as right for persons with disabilities. The CRPD includes an obligation for the state parties to take appropriate measures, including legislative measures, to eliminate obstacles and barriers to participation in the digital era and thus ease access to the use of ICT products and services (United Nations, 2006). China ratified the CRPD in 2008 and amended its disability law LPPD the same year. China has added a chapter concerning accessibility, including provisions on web accessibility. The law requires the state and other public agencies to develop and provide disability-friendly ICT products and services (art. 54) (National People's Congress, 2008). In 2012, China adopted a complementary administrative *Regulation on Accessibility* (ROA) with more detailed accessibility regulations: e.g., public information should be provided in different formats (art.19); caption should be provided for pre-recorded video (art. 21); telecommunication operators should provide services to meet the needs of all users; ICT producers should develop accessible products (art. 26). Particularly, web portals for disabled people's organisations, government departments, and other public sectors are required to "gradually conform to the minimum accessibility standard" (art. 23) (the State Council, 2012).

Major guideline documents regarding web accessibility include the State Council's documents 2008/7 and 2010/19 and the MIIT and CDPF's joint document 2020/146. This kind of guideline documents aim to develop long-term goals in main disability policy areas and propose a general task list for each policy area. The MIIT and CDPF's joint document 2020/146 put forth a set of goals concerning web accessibility by 2021, including paying subsidies for disabled people in using telecom services, promoting digital infrastructures in rural areas, improving the accessibility of government web portals and mobile applications, and creating accessibility evaluation system (MIIT & CDPF, 2020). In many cases, action plans follow and respond to the definite goals in the guideline document. For instance, to address the concerns in MIT and CDPF's document 2020/146, China launched a special project of innovating ICT applications and optimising web accessibility in December 2020. Starting in January 2021, this one-year project attempted to evaluate and improve web accessibility of 158 widely used websites and mobile applications. More than half of the selected were government web portals and mobile applications in public sectors. The program introduced an evaluation system, released evaluation results to the public, and referred the results to enterprise credit rating (MIIT, 2020). In summary, legislation, government guideline documents, and action plans all contribute to the policy framework to enhance accessible e-service delivery in China.

A central-local policy transfer on disability policy delivery

As discussed earlier, the post-reform decentralisation has engendered a division of administrative functions and obligations. Consequently, the national government is more responsible for policymaking than implementation. The provincial government plays a coordinating role between the national and municipal governments, adjusting the national policy based on the overall provincial socio-economic development and guiding the policy implementation at the subordinated governments. Municipalities further localise such provincially-transferred national policies and play the actual and core role in implementing those localised policies. Figure 2 identifies the core policy provisions to provide accessible e-

services at each level of government as in the relations between the central government, the Hubei Province and Wuhan Municipality.

Structure of Chinese Government	Example	Selected Policy Provisions on Accessible E-Service Delivery	
<p style="text-align: center;">Central Government</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">The State Council, Ministries (e.g., MIIT) and other public agencies (e.g., CDPF)</p>	<p><i>Law of the Protection for Persons with Disabilities</i> (2008)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “...the state and societal sectors develop ICT products for persons with disabilities ...” (art. 54)
		<p><i>CDPF and other 15 Ministries/Agencies’ Guidance on Accelerating the Building of Social Security and Public Service Delivery Systems for Persons with Disabilities</i> (2010)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “...relevant departments shall...make web accessibility standards, accelerate the development of web accessibility techniques for Web, mobile phones, and computers....”
		<p><i>Regulations on Accessibility</i> (2012)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Websites for Disabled Persons’ Organizations (DPOs) shall conform to web accessibility standards; websites for governments and public events (at or above municipality) shall gradually conform to web accessibility standards. (art. 23)
		<p><i>The 13th “Five-Year” (2016-2020) Implementation Program on Accessible Environment Building</i> (2016)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthen the web accessibility renovation for government and public service websites. Websites for governments and public sectors (at and above municipality) shall be at least accessible for persons with disabilities.
		<p><i>MIIT and CDPF’s Guiding Opinion Regarding Improving the Accessibility of ICT</i> (2020)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “...by 2021, web accessibility of government websites and mobile e-service applications shall be greatly improved....” Accelerate the improvement of web accessibility of all-level governments’ websites, e-governance service platform and interfaces.
		<p><i>The 14th “Five-Year” (2021-2025) Implementation Program on Accessible Environment Building</i> (2021)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accelerate ICT accessibility building for governance and other public services...accelerate the expansion of accessible websites, mobile applications, and self-service public facilities. Ninety-five per cent of government and public sectors and e-government service portals shall complete web accessibility renovation and improvement. Ninety-five per cent of e-government service mobile applications shall complete web accessibility renovation.
<p style="text-align: center;">Provincial Governments (34)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Hubei</p>	<p><i>Hubei Accessible Environment Building and Management Regulations</i> (2008)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">No relevant policy provisions.</p>
		<p><i>Hubei’s 13th “five-year” (2016-2020) Development program on disability affairs</i> (2016)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">No relevant policy provisions.</p>
		<p><i>Hubei Management Measures on Accessible Environment Building</i> (2019)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Websites for DPOs shall conform to web accessibility standards and provide necessary assistance for disabled people to use the internet. Websites for governments and public events, at and above municipality, ought to gradually conform to web accessibility standards. County-level governments ought to gradually take accessibility policy measures to ease access to online information for persons with disabilities.
		<p><i>Hubei’s 14th “five-year” (2021-2025) Development Program on Disability Affairs</i> (2021)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accelerate the web accessibility renovation for government portals, public service websites and online service platforms. Web accessibility renovation for e-

			government WeChat platform and mobile applications shall take place first.
Municipal Governments (334)	Wuhan	<i>Wuhan Accessible Environment Building and Management Measures</i> (2010)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage the development of accessible websites and ICT products for persons with disabilities.
		<i>Wuhan's 13th "Five-Year" (2016-2020) Development Program on Disability Affairs</i> (2016)	No relevant policy provisions.
		<i>Wuhan's 13th "Five-Year" (2021-2026) Development Program on Disability Affairs</i> (2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accelerate the web accessibility renovation for government portals, public service websites and online service platforms. Web accessibility renovation for E-government WeChat platform and mobile applications shall take place first.

Figure 2 Policy initiatives on providing accessible government websites adopted by Chinese national, provincial, and municipal governments

After the central government passed the amendment of *LPPD* in 2008, Hubei and Wuhan immediately adopted their provincial and municipal regulations on accessible environment building in 2008 and 2010. However, while the national government has been engaged in enriching the web accessibility policy framework step by step, subnational governments have not always reacted very actively or timely. After the State Council adopted the *Regulations on Accessibility* in 2012, Hubei provincial government did not respond until 2019 by updating its provincial accessibility regulations. So far, Wuhan municipal government has so far not updated its municipal accessibility regulation by following the national and provincial policy texts. Such policy transfer is legally required, though. Besides, since 2016 the central government has re-emphasised the need for web accessibility renovation of government websites in clear policy guidelines. Yet, action plans in Hubei and Wuhan did not include relevant policy measures before the 14th “Five-Year” Period (2021-2025). Moreover, compared to the national policy initiatives, Hubei province and Wuhan municipality have adopted relatively limited and narrow measures.

Disability Service Delivery Outcomes across localities: Wuhan and Shenzhen

Policy outcomes in two municipalities

To illustrate policy and implementation outcomes across localities, we compare two municipalities; Wuhan and Shenzhen (see Figure 3). Despite the gap in socio-economic development, both Wuhan and Shenzhen have ranked among the Top10 Chinese Cities by GDP. In 2018, Shenzhen passed a bill envisioning to create a barrier-free city and local law concerning accessible built environment. This way, Shenzhen became the first municipality that passed local legislation to facilitate the web accessibility renovation for government and public service websites. Shenzhen has adopted a set of local policy initiatives aiming at completing web accessibility renovation for all websites of government and public sectors. In comparison, Wuhan – similar to most Chinese municipalities – has only adopted a “standard transfer”.

Figure 3 compares local legislation, standards, and action plans incorporating provisions on web accessibility renovation for governments and public sectors' websites in the two municipalities. *First*, although Wuhan adopted its administrative regulation on accessibility in 2010, this document does not include any provisions to facilitate web accessibility renovation. Besides, Wuhan has not updated its local accessibility regulation since the State Council adopted the *Regulations on Accessibility* in 2012. While Shenzhen locally legislated the accessibility building in 2010 following the amendment of *LPPD* (2008), this municipality updated its local accessibility legislation by adding *Shenzhen Special Economic Zone Regulations on Accessible City Building* in 2021. Besides, to guide the web accessibility building, renovation and improvement, Shenzhen has been engaged in making local accessibility standard which is still missing in Wuhan. Wuhan has adopted local "Five-Year Development Programs on Disability Affairs" while Shenzhen in addition has adopted several other action plans and measures to foster web accessibility of e-government platforms.

Additionally, the depth of the local policy transfer varies. From Figure 3 we see that Shenzhen required the government websites to gradually complete web accessibility renovation in its 2010's regulation on accessibility. This requirement was barely considered by most municipalities back then because such policy provision was even not adopted by the national government until the State Council enacted the *Regulations on Accessibility* in 2012. Also, in the national 14th "Five-Year" Development Program on Disability Affairs, the national government has set up the policy goal of "accelerating the web accessibility renovation for government portals, e-government service platforms, and online service applications". Once again, this is an ambiguous but also flexible and negotiable goal. The transfer of such policy goals in Wuhan's local action plan is to "...accelerate the web accessibility renovation for government portals, public service websites and online service applications. E-governance WeChat Account and (other) applications shall complete accessibility renovation first." Shenzhen's interpretation is "...following web accessibility standards, to renovate all kinds of governance and public service websites and their mobile application...". Most importantly, Shenzhen increased the ambition by aiming at accomplishing web accessibility renovation for *all* relevant websites by 2025.

	Wuhan		Shenzhen	
Population	11.08 Million (2021)		12.59 Million (2021)	
GDP	USD 274 Billion (2021)		USD 457.1 Billion (2021)	
Fiscal Budget for Disability Affairs	37.66 Million CNY (2021)		98.31 Million CNY (2021)	
Fiscal Budget for Disability Affairs	Not explicitly identified in 2021's budget-expenditure documents		2.55 Million CNY (2021)	
Local <i>Legislation or Regulation</i> on web accessibility of government websites	Wuhan's Accessible Environment Building and Management Measures (2010)	"Encourage the development of accessible websites."	Shenzhen Regulations on Accessibility (2010)	"Websites for government and public sectors shall gradually implement web accessibility renovation and provide accessible information for the visually impaired according to web accessibility standards."
		No specific requirements for web accessibility renovation of government websites.	Shenzhen Special Economic Zone Regulations on Accessible City Building (2021)	"Public Service Websites shall conform to web accessibility standards."
Local <i>Standard</i> on Web Accessibility Building and Renovation	No such local standards		Standards for Urban Information Accessibility (2021)	5.2.6. Urban ICT interfaces shall complete web accessibility renovation, and governance service websites shall initiate accessibility renovation according to this document.
Local <i>Action Plans</i> on Web Accessibility Renovation for Government Website	Wuhan's 13th "Five-Year" (2016-2020) Development Program on Disability Affairs (2016)	No relevant policy initiatives.	Shenzhen's 13th "Five-Year" (2016-2020) Development Program on Disability Affairs (2016)	"...(to) facilitate the web accessibility renovation for government and public service websites...."
	Wuhan's 14th "Five-Year" (2021-2026) Development Program on Disability Affairs (2021)	"...(to) accelerate the web accessibility renovation for government and public service portals and platforms...." "Web accessibility renovation for E-government WeChat platform and mobile applications shall take place first."	Shenzhen's 14th "Five-Year" (2021-2026) Development Program on Disability Affairs (2021)	"...(to) accelerate web accessibility renovation of e-governance platforms..." "following accessibility standards, <i>all</i> government and public service websites and mobile applications shall complete renovation by 2025."
			Shenzhen's Action Plan on Creating an Accessible City (2018)	"Facilitate the web accessibility of public information." "...using web assistive tool and screen reading techniques to complete the web accessibility renovation for all government service websites...."

		Shenzhen's Overall Plan on Accessible City Building (2020-2035)	“Make and improve web accessibility standards and legislation framework for Shenzhen.” “Build and improve accessible online public service platforms...design accessible service platforms...establish monitoring mechanism...”
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Figure 3 Local policy framework on providing accessible government websites in Shenzhen and Wuhan

Service delivery outcome in the two municipalities

In this part, we compare how differently two selected municipalities have implemented the web accessibility renovation for their government and public service portals. Despite differentiated policy transfer outcomes, both Wuhan and Shenzhen have promised to speed up the web accessibility renovation and provide accessible e-governance platforms. Therefore, we conducted a small-size web accessibility test for selected local government websites in two municipalities to see how the disability service delivery varies.

We first processed the accessibility test using the automatic tool Achecker which has been used worldwide to evaluate how accessible and usable a webpage is for persons with disability. Achecker’s test is based on WCAG (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines) that includes four accessibility principles, namely *perceivable*, *operable*, *understandable*, and *robust*, under which 12 guidelines/61 testable success criteria are covered. In WCAG, three levels of conformance are defined: A (lowest), AA and AAA (highest) (W3C, 2008). In 2019, China made the Information Technology – Internet Content Accessibility Technical Requirements and Conformance Testing, referencing WCAG 2.0, a national standard. In our test, we used Achecker to check the conformance level A as it is closer to the requirements in Chinese web accessibility provisions. We selected the homepages of four portals for government and public sectors in Shenzhen and Wuhan that persons with disabilities are likely to use, especially the first two, the municipal government portal and the Disabled Persons’ Federation (DPF)’s Portal. The former is a platform that consists of links to wide-range e-governance services and archives of public information and policy texts. The latter includes more disability-specific services and public information. Figure 4 illustrates the testing results.

Tested Sites	Standard/ Guidelines	Accessibility Features	Known Problems	Likely Problems	Potential Problems
Wuhan Municipal Government Portal			196	0	481
Shenzhen Municipal Government Portal			18	0	371
Wuhan Disabled Persons’ Federation Portal			27	0	160
Shenzhen Disabled Persons’ Federation			15	0	174
Wuhan Bureau of Civil Affairs (BCA)	WCAG 2.0 Level A	Yes	24	0	217
Shenzhen Bureau of Civil Affairs			63	0	471
Wuhan Bureau of Human Resources and Social Security (HRSS)			33	0	345
Shenzhen Bureau of Human Resources and Social Security (HRSS)			429	0	275

Figure 4 Web accessibility testing Results of four government/public sector websites in Wuhan and Shenzhen

First of all, all selected websites have added accessibility features. Users, especially persons with disabilities, can use such functionality to read screens, adjust text size, webpage contrast, line spacing, speech volume and speed, and so on. The accessibility feature is an essential step in web accessibility renovation. Then we move to the test results. Test results from Achecker contain three types of accessibility errors identified from the tested web pages: known problems, likely problems, and potential problems. Usually, likely problems and potential problems ask for further manual review. This is one of the limitations of using automatic accessibility testing methods. Achecker identified 196 known problems in Wuhan People’s Government Portal; only 18 such errors were found in the Shenzhen case. The portal for Wuhan DPF also has more accessibility errors (27) than Shenzhen DPF (15). These results indicate that portals for municipal government and disabled persons’ federation in Shenzhen are more accessible than those in Wuhan. However, this seems not to be a conclusive finding when we compare the web accessibility of other government departments’ websites. As we can see, Achecker discovered more web accessibility problems on the websites of the Shenzhen Bureau of Civil Affairs and Bureau of Human Resources and Social Security than those in Wuhan. It suggests that web accessibility may vary across different government websites.

Due to the limitation of automatic tests, we also introduced a manual review to triangulate and validate the test results. For this purpose we used data from the National Web Accessibility Evaluation Reports of Public Service Websites in 2019. Internet Society of China (ISC), collaborating with relevant government departments and NGOs, continuously launched web accessibility evaluations for 100 thousand websites in government and public sectors nationwide in 2019 and monthly released the evaluation results. The evaluation referenced the national standards *Guidelines for web content accessibility (GB/T 29799-2013)* and *Universal Design Standard for Web Accessibility* to scrutinise four major web accessibility principles: perceivability, understandability, operability, and compatibility of the webpage design. Mainly based on the visually impaired users’ experiences, these four principles were scored up to 30, 30, 20, and 20 points, respectively, and then summed as an overall score ranging from 0 to 100. We use this data source for several reasons. *First*, this is the latest official web accessibility evaluation launched by the Chinese national government. *Second*, the guidelines used there also referenced WCAG 2.0, the same guidelines used in the above automatic testing. *Third*, the evaluation method relied on manual review, which would complement the automatic test. We selected three of the four previously tested websites for the manual review as the national evaluation did not include portals for Disabled Persons’ Federation.

Sites	Perceivability	Understandability	Operability	compatibility	Overall Score
Wuhan Municipal Government Portal	15.9	10	12.3	7	45.2
Shenzhen Municipal Government Portal	18.3	10	12.3	9	49.6
Wuhan Bureau of Civil Affairs	12.3	10.1	12.3	5	39.7
Shenzhen Bureau of Civil Affairs	10.8	13.2	10.2	8	42.2

Wuhan Bureau of Human Resources and Social Security	13.5	15.9	10.8	5	45.2
Shenzhen Bureau of Human Resources and Social Security	12.4	13.1	14.7	7	47.2

Figure 5 Manual review results on web accessibility of selected government websites in Wuhan and Shenzhen

In Figure 5, we can see that all selected government/public sectors' websites in Shenzhen were more accessible than those in Wuhan in the manual review. Shenzhen municipal government portal scored 49,6/100, better than Wuhan's 45,2/100. This finding matches the previous automatic testing result. However, the manual review also suggests that the portals for another two government departments, the Bureau of Civil Affairs and Bureau of Human Resources and Social Security in Shenzhen, are more accessible than those in Wuhan, opposing findings from the automatic testing. Although we are far from a definite conclusion from the above web accessibility tests, at least two findings can be highlighted. *First*, despite mixed or even opposite testing results, both automatic tool and manual review agree that, for some important e-governance platforms such as municipal government portal, Shenzhen has made web accessibility renovation better than Wuhan. *Second*, same as disparate policy transfer outcomes, the disability service delivery also differs across localities – some are doing better than others.

4. Discussion

We now proceed to discuss how the post-reform decentralisation in China, especially during the 1980s and 1990s, has influenced disability service delivery. Like many other social policies, web accessibility policy has been influenced by the decentralisation reforms. In theory this reform could have represented an ideal policy choice for the local government. In practice it has been associated with risks of a gap between visions at the national level and interpretations, priorities and capacities at the local level. This gap has in turn affected disability service delivery at ground level. In our cases, the distinct web accessibility policy initiatives and accessibility of government websites in Wuhan and Shenzhen demonstrate regional disparity in disability service delivery. This finding supports existing literature on how decentralisation has influenced other generic public services, e.g., environment protection (Cai et al., 2022), education (Shen et al., 2014), and employment (Mok & Wu, 2013).

In broad terms, insufficient web accessibility policy transfer to local governments and regional disparity in providing accessible government websites are related to the decentralisation reforms in the last century. The increasing administrative and fiscal self-governance have to a certain extent made local government able to negotiate with the national policy makers and determine the extent to which they would transfer policies from upper governments so as to “match the local contexts”. Regional disparities in fiscal revenue and governance capacity caused by the decentralisation reforms have made leeway for local discretion and adjustments. All these can help explain why Wuhan's local initiatives to improve web accessibility of government websites have been behind national policy expectation and why Shenzhen has done better than Wuhan in the domain of web accessibility.

Ideally decentralisation aims to surrender powers to local governments so they can adopt the most suitable action plans for public service delivery. Yet, the larger autonomy itself may cause a space for gaming the national policy and undermining public service provision. For instance, local governments have taken advantage of increasing fiscal authority to expand the local economy as the expense of leaving aside governance responsibilities such as disability service delivery (Liu, 2009). Moreover, local governments are likely to prioritise some social services over others, e.g., healthcare services over disability services.

We should be cautious about concluding how much the decentralisation reforms have enhanced or hindered the disability service delivery without more rigorous measurement. The swift response to and sufficient transfer of the national accessibility policies and the provision of accessible e-government web portals in Shenzhen may show us a somewhat enhanced disability service delivery due to the decentralisation reforms – at least in some affluent regions. This does not imply that decentralisation ultimately leads to better public services in Shenzhen. Nor can we say it has worsened the public service delivery, despite the experiences in Wuhan. Instead, the impacts of decentralisation on public service delivery are mixed and inconclusive. The disparities between Wuhan and Shenzhen suggest that, although facilitating public service delivery, decentralisation may also increase the risks of inequalities between the localities.

Several limitations of this study should be noticed. First, we are missing data about the communication between politicians and administrative staff at the national, regional and municipal level, and about the decision-making processes behind the political priorities within the municipalities. Second, we are missing information on how enterprises and civil society organisations matter in the design and implementation of web accessibility policies. Such data will be of importance to assess the scope for feedback on the quality of the public services from non-governmental actors and professional expertise outside public sector. This is not the least of importance to be able to critically assess the meaning of “decentralisation” in a Chinese context and how it sits with the coining of the term in the academic literature from the global North. Third, the unexpected and inconsistent findings from the test results from the automatic testing by ourselves and manual review conducted by the government give reasons to ask if combing two different data sources necessarily has increased the validity of our findings. Methods and criteria used in the official manual review were out of our control, which may make it hard to compare with our automatic testing results. Therefore, to further verify the web accessibility of government websites or disability service delivery outcomes, a more rigorous research design and evaluation methods will be needed.

5. Conclusion

We started this chapter by asking what “decentralization” involves and means in a Chinese context, and how the Chinese version of “decentralization” affect the provision of disability services. Arguably the use of the concept in a Chinese context sits uneasily with how it is usually framed and perceived in the literature in the global North. In a Chinese context, “decentralization” assumes specific characteristics that differ from how the concept has been

conceived in the literature in the global North. Chinese decentralization reforms have involved more financial autonomy for the provinces, delegation of responsibilities and administrative power within a one-party system. The reforms have been associated with ambitions of economic growth and administrative efficiency. The market and civil society organisations have been attributed more autonomy but within a one-party system. Yet, even within this system, we find different responses at the local level, varying from feet-dragging and minimum implementation to eagerness to demonstrate compliance with the national ambitions and efforts to go beyond national ambitions. Vertically, China has motivated local governments, provoked regional competition, and boosted economic growth by devolving fiscal and administrative powers. Many governance and management functions and responsibilities, including public service delivery, have been delegated to local governments. Horizontally, a number of disability organisations emerged in the 1980s and have become involved as additional and alternative service providers.

Increasing fiscal and administrative powers have enabled local governments to negotiate with the central government and selectively transfer policies from upper governments and adapting to local conditions. However, as the decentralisation has not benefitted all localities simultaneously, it has resulted in disparity in local socio-economic development and the capabilities of the local government. Consequently, while some localities are capable of actively responding to policy measures from upper governments, others are not. This has further resulted in the variation in policy transfer and implementation outcomes and, therefore, in the quality of public service delivery across localities. Focusing on disability services, our findings suggest that China still has a long way to go to achieve the 2006's political doctrine of creating a "harmonious society" and the vision of "equalising public service delivery". This study extends our knowledge of current disability-specific public service delivery in China and the current challenges in public service provision in Chinese society.

Our comparative case study of the implementation of policies to ensure accessible government websites in Wuhan and Shenzhen demonstrate that local disability policy implementation vary across regions. We have argued that disparities in local finance and governance capability – caused by the decentralisation reforms – have made some local governments less capable to implement the national ambitions. The impacts of decentralisation have made the delivery outcomes in one place differ from another and widened the inequalities in disability service provision in China. The findings have implications for our understanding of the challenges in disability service provision since the post-1980 decentralisation reforms. It also suggests that a neoliberal policy choice imported from the Global North does not work as a quick fix for all governance ills in transit economies such as China. Finally, the experience of China contributes new knowledge about how policies imported from the global North has impacted countries in the global South.

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