



**Implementation of e-Government Initiative: A Case Study of
Accessibility Upgrades in Chinese Municipal Government
Websites**

Journal:	<i>Transforming Government: People, Process and Policy</i>
Manuscript ID	TG-09-2024-0223.R2
Manuscript Type:	Research Paper
Keywords:	e-Government, policy implementation, web accessibility, local governance, China, government website

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to identify Chinese municipal agencies and cadres' drivers to implement the government websites' accessibility upgrades, and how these drivers are interrelated to shape the implementation outcome.

Design/Methodology/Approach: We conducted a single case study using qualitative interviews, online follow-up conversations, fieldwork observations, and policy documents in the capital municipality MD of J Province, East China. We analyzed the case from the theoretical perspectives of institutional pressures, organizational capacity, and individual intentions.

Findings: Coercive pressure through policy mandate and benchmark incentivized the responsible agency and cadres in MD to initiate the implementation of the accessibility upgrades and "meet the set targets". The responsible agency's enhanced organizational capacity and local cadres' engagement allowed them to "outperform" as their eventual way of achieving the mandate requirements. The implementation outcome resulted from the interplay of all levels of incentives. Coercive pressure predominantly drove the launch of the upgrade project, meanwhile significantly influencing the organizational- and individual-level incentives that additionally explained the outperformance.

Originality/Value: This study provides a nuanced, in-depth understanding of how sedimented factors and especially their interrelationships drive the implementation of e-government initiatives and shape the implementation outcome in Chinese municipal agencies.

Article Classification: Research Paper


Keywords

E-government, web accessibility, government websites, policy implementation,
incentives, local governance, China

Introduction

Implementation of e-government initiatives has been a national policy goal in China for the purpose of providing accessible and responsive services (Homburg *et al.*, 2022; Chen *et al.*, 2023). China's e-government ambitions have triggered many academic, political, and societal debates, one of which concerns the question of whether, and if so, how the implementation of e-government policies and initiatives reaches China's local governments' shop floors of service delivery (Ma *et al.*, 2005; Schlæger, 2013). This question of implementation has been addressed at the intersections of academic disciplines of information systems (Kamal, 2006; Melin and Wihlborg, 2018; Madaki *et al.*, 2024), public administration (Lipsky, 1980; Sabatier, 1986; Hill and Hupe, 2021), and China studies (O'Brien and Li, 1999; Ahlers and Schubert, 2015). A specific gap in our understanding concerns how institutional pressure from higher-level governments, the organizational capacity of local governments, and local cadres' incentives interact to explain implementation outcomes (Zheng *et al.*, 2013; Teets *et al.*, 2017; Zhang *et al.*, 2021; Zhang *et al.*, 2022).

This study fills this gap in the literature by presenting the results of a case analysis of the implementation of the Web Accessibility and Age-Friendly Oriented Upgrades of Internet Applications (“互联网应用无障碍适老化改造”, “accessibility upgrade” hereafter) (Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT), 2020). Inclusive and equitable digital service provision has become a global concern in the digital age (United Nations, 2006), especially in an era where rapid digital transformation in the public sector occurs (Kim and Lee, 2024). It can particularly be relevant and challenging for China, where persons with disabilities and elderly adults (aged 60 and above) account for more than 20 percent of the entire population (State Council, 2021; Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2023). The 2020 accessibility upgrade initiative expects government websites, among other e-government applications, to comply

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3 with three technical standards¹, pass technical tests conducted by, and receive “Web
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5 Accessibility Icon ” from the Internet Society of China (ISC) (MIIT, 2020; MIIT, 2021).

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7 However, only a few municipalities have implemented the accessibility upgrades of their
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9 websites to the degree that all three standards will be met (ISC, 2022).

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11
12 This case study refers to the successful implementation of the accessibility upgrades
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14 in the capital city (abbreviated as MD to preserve the anonymity of the respondents) of J
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16 Province, East China. We formulate the research question as “What factors incentivize the
17
18 implementation of the 2020 national initiative of government website accessibility upgrade in
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20 the MD municipality, and how are these factors interrelated to shape the implementation
21
22 outcome?” Through the theoretical lenses of institutional pressures, organizational capacity,
23
24 and individual intentions, we conduct our analysis using qualitative data sources derived from
25
26 fieldwork conducted in MD between January and March 2023. This study contributes to
27
28 literature in several ways. First, the study adds to our understanding of how local
29
30 governments anticipate and cope with e-government accessibility issues (Jaeger, 2006; Peng,
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32 2016; Vollenwyder *et al.*, 2019; Bai *et al.*, 2021). Second, it provides an improved
33
34 understanding of how, in the implementation of a particular e-government policy initiative,
35
36 various factors are interrelated to produce policy outcomes, a theme that has been
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38 underreported in the e-government implementation literature (Gil-García and Pardo, 2005; Al-
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40 -Mamari *et al.*, 2013; Savoldelli *et al.*, 2014; Henning, 2018; Dias, 2020; Madaki *et al.*,
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42 2024). Third and finally, it adds to our understanding of how policy implementation in
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44 China’s semi-authoritarian governance systems occurs as these initiatives devolve from
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55 ¹ Information Technology—Internet Content Accessibility Technical Requirements and Conformance
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57 Testing (GB/T 37668-2019), Universal Design Guidelines for Aging-Friendly Websites, and
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59 Information Accessibility for People with Physical Disabilities Testing Specification for Web
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Content Accessibility Evaluation (YD/T 1822-2008).

national to provincial and local levels of governance, using the implementation of the web accessibility initiative as a case study.

Literature Review and Theoretical Perspectives

Implementation of Web Accessibility Initiatives

Web accessibility means that users can perceive, understand, and interact with websites and their services regardless of physical limitations (Vollenwyder *et al.*, 2019; W3C WAI, 2024).

Web accessibility is tightly related to delivering promises of universal, equitable and inclusive access to public information and services (Kopackova *et al.*, 2010), trustworthy communication between citizens and government (Youngblood and Mackiewicz, 2012), realizing public values in e-service delivery (Karkin and Janssen, 2014), and raising life quality and equalizing political participation (Rubaii-Barrett and Wise, 2008; Obi *et al.*, 2013). Existing literature, which has extensively focused on accessibility evaluation in the past two decades, has reported that promises of inclusive and accessible e-services have not been realized due to non-implementation of and non-compliance with accessibility standards (Jaeger, 2006; Shi, 2007; Kuzma, 2010; Youngblood and Mackiewicz, 2012; Zhao, 2013; Al-Khalifa *et al.*, 2017). For the situation in China, Shi (2007) examined 324 Chinese local government websites, concluding that all sites failed to pass one or more WCAG 1.0 standard criteria. While a more recent study noted improvements in the accessibility of Chinese government websites between 2009 and 2013 (Rau *et al.*, 2016), Peng (2016) found none of the 246 selected municipal government websites conform to the updated standard WCAG 2.0. Claimed reasons for implementation outcomes lagging behind ambitions include weak awareness (Al-Khalifa, 2012; Guo, 2012), absence of legislation and policy foundations (Shi, 2007; Kous *et al.*, 2021), absence of enforcement measures (Olarere and Lazar, 2011; Al-Khalifa *et al.*, 2017), technical and guideline complexity (Kuzma, 2010), and insufficient

resources (Abanumy *et al.*, 2005; Olalere and Lazar, 2011; Youngblood and Mackiewicz, 2012). Peng (2016) conducted a regression analysis on the relationship between local demographic characteristics, IT-related investment, and the level of Chinese municipal government websites. Bai *et al.* (2021) conducted an identical analysis in the US. These studies, however, have not focused on the implementation dynamics of accessibility initiatives, thus bringing us to the next section.

e-Government Initiative Implementation: Interactions between Three Levels of Analysis

Despite persuasive benefits and the digitalization trend, e-government initiatives are not always implemented by government agencies as expected (Ahn, 2011; Feeney and Brown, 2017). For the situation in China, empirical findings suggest that local governments display a surprisingly wide array of strategic responses to top-down mandates in the e-government domain, such as symbolical or selective implementation, or holding wait-and-see attitudes towards above-levels of government (Liang *et al.*, 2017; Tan *et al.*, 2022; Zhang and Mora, 2023). Throughout the world, existing literature has explored the factors that incentivize or constrain the adoption and implementation of e-government initiatives (Gil-García and Pardo, 2005; Savoldelli *et al.*, 2014; Henning, 2018), particularly at the local-level governments (Guillamón *et al.*, 2016; Dias, 2020; Tangi *et al.*, 2022). Below, we synthesize generic e-government implementation literature with insights from Chinese public administration studies and identify factors and mechanisms at broadly three levels of analysis: macro-level institutional factors, meso-level variables related to organizational capacity, and micro-level individual intentions. These three levels of influence factor also present the theoretical perspectives guiding our empirical analysis.

One thread in the e-government implementation literature focuses on the role of institutions in providing pressure on the implementation of e-government initiatives (Zheng

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2
3 *et al.*, 2013; Homburg *et al.*, 2014; Henning, 2018). Institutional theory has been proposed to
4
5 identify how government agencies seek legitimacy by responding to coercive, mimetic, and
6
7 normative pressures (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Jun and Weare, 2010). In the e-
8
9 government literature, Henning (2018) identified that enforcement instruments and
10
11 accountability mechanisms (Dawes and Eglene, 2008; Kamal *et al.*, 2011) have a positive
12
13 influence on Dutch municipalities' implementation of technological standards. In the Chinese
14
15 context, Zheng *et al.* (2013) confirmed the positive impacts of coercive and normative
16
17 pressures in information systems implementation. Tan *et al.* (2022) illustrated that local
18
19 governments' overarching political environment can influence how local agency stakeholders
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21 perceive and act strategically in the power structures, which finally influences the
22
23 performance and results of e-government implementation. In sum, the institutional theory
24
25 provides rich but rather abstract institutional pressures in e-government implementation,
26
27 leaving considerable room for identifying more specific patterns and mechanisms that explain
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29 varieties of implementations in lower-level governments that are exposed to similar
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31 institutional pressures (Fan *et al.*, 2014; Zhao *et al.*, 2022). We therefore turn to
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33 organizational-level variables and mechanisms.
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40 A second thread in the literature concerns organizational capacity in implementing e-
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42 government initiatives. The organizational capacity firstly can relate to the allocation and
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44 availability of tangible, intangible, financial, and human resources, which affect an
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46 organization's performance and competitiveness in general activities (Barney, 1991; Chae *et*
47
48 *al.*, 2014). The impact of project teams' expertise and financial capacity, for instance, has
49
50 often been reported in the e-government literature (Gil-García and Pardo, 2005; Ahn, 2011;
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52 Zheng *et al.*, 2013). Secondly, it can also be determined by specific arrangements that refer to
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54 the deployment and adjustment of organizational structures and processes, power relations,
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56 and communication, which facilitate or constrain certain activities (Tornatzky and Fleischer,
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3 1990; Zhao *et al.*, 2022). Arrangements such as top management support (Zheng *et al.*, 2013;
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5 Henning, 2018), enabling leadership and coordination setting (Fan *et al.*, 2014; Zhao and Fan,
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7 2021), and organizational structure (Cassell, 2008), have been highlighted as drivers for e-
8
9 government implementation. Thirdly, organizations may reach out to learn for capacity
10
11 development, and the way and degree to which they learn can affect their organizational
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13 capacity (Dunlop and Radaelli, 2018). In a study of e-government implementation, Homburg
14
15 *et al.* (2014) argued that local governments respond to persuasive external pressures by
16
17 searching and scanning for knowledge, solutions, and inspiration in alliances and peers to
18
19 enhance their capacities. They distinguished organizational learning as an activity inspired by
20
21 comparisons with peers rather than as responses to pressures from vertical coercion. Some
22
23 Chinese public administration studies have noted that in a similar way. Chinese local
24
25 agencies very often develop local networks or what Teets *et al.* (2017) called “professional
26
27 community” or “Quanzi” to expand their capacity to mobilize resources, share ways of doing
28
29 things, and thus mitigate risks when implementing top-down initiatives (Zhou, 2010).
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35 However, the view has, to a limited degree, been discussed in Chinese e-government
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37 literature.
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40 A third thread complementing the institutional- and organizational-level explanations
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42 focuses on individual-level incentives and motivations. Existing e-government literature has
43
44 argued that employee and stakeholders’ perceived benefits, risks, and efforts (Yang and Wu,
45
46 2016; Liang *et al.*, 2017) and their attitudes, beliefs, and commitments (Zheng *et al.*, 2013;
47
48 Ratten, 2016) all may influence their decision of implementation. As Ajzen (1991) argued, an
49
50 individual’s intention to perform a given behavior is determined by their attitude, subjective
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52 norms, and perceived behavioral control – the stronger the intention, the higher the likelihood
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54 of performance. A conventional view is that Chinese local cadres’ incentive to policy
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56 implementation is tied to the “target responsibility evaluation system” that measures
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3 individuals' performance and couples it with promotion incentives (Heberer and Trappel,
4
5 2013). Following this logic, some Chinese e-government studies argued that Chinese local
6
7 cadres are motivated to respond to the top-down e-government initiative due to their personal
8
9 commitment to upward accountability and career concerns (Zhao *et al.*, 2022; Zhang and
10
11 Mora, 2023). However, at least two reasons have been reported in the literature explaining
12
13 why not all local cadres are incentivized by the prospect of promotion (Gao, 2017). The first
14
15 reason is that the performance evaluation system itself confronts individual public officials
16
17 with a dazzling array of hundreds, sometimes contradictory indicators for "success" (Teets *et*
18
19 *al.*, 2017). The second reason is that some cadres, especially those Gao (2017) called
20
21 "ceilinged native officials", rather choose to focus more on local problems and local
22
23 governance challenges (Ma and Pang, 2017). Their motivations to perform well are driven by
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25 cultural, ethical, and moral values (Gao, 2017). In e-government implementation cases,
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27 responding to user focus and social expectations has been increasingly highlighted as a major
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29 incentive, contrasting the conventional view (Liang *et al.*, 2017; Schlæger and Stepan, 2017;
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31 Xiao *et al.*, 2022).

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38 In sum, the above discussion shows how national e-government policy initiatives
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40 trickle down from institutional pressures to local agencies' organizational and local cadres'
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42 individual responses. The mechanisms that link various stages and phases of e-government
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44 implementation serve as theoretical lenses through which the implementation of the national
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46 accessibility initiative in MD municipality is analyzed.

47 48 49 50 51 **Methods and Data**

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54 To address our research questions, we conducted a single case study of the accessibility
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56 initiative implementation in the capital municipality MD of J Province, East China. We
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58 justify our choice for a case study generally because of the case study's unique properties to
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3 answer “why” and “how”-questions (Patton, 2002; Miles *et al.*, 2014), which is relevant
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5 given the open characteristics of our research question and overall ambition to add to an
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7 improved theoretical understanding of e-government initiative implementation in China’s
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9 local governance (Walsham, 2006). Throughout the research process, it has been our express
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11 intention to provide a rich and detailed understanding of the implementation dynamics and
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13 identify crucial variables and interrelations between them by analyzing qualitative data.
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15 Following recommended practices for qualitative research, data gathering was conducted in
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17 parallel with data analysis and theory development, starting with the constructs and
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19 perspectives that emerged in a first exploration of the literature (Eisenhardt, 1989; Walsham,
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21 2006). Like many other applications of case study methodologies, we aim for analytic
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23 generalization and contribution to the literature on e-government policy implementation in
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25 China’s particular government system, without claiming that statistical generalization to other
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27 contexts is aimed for or possible.
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33 The choice for the municipality MD was informed by the circumstance that it was one
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35 of the few municipalities that managed to complete the initiative by achieving the national-
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37 level suggestions beyond the provincial-level requirements in 2022, making it an “outlier
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39 case” (Seawright, 2016). Furthermore, fieldwork in China is complicated by political
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41 concerns over information security and public reputation, implying that officials often avoid
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43 interviews or public comments, especially if overseas researchers are involved. Thus, data
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45 availability and access also had implications for our case selection. The article’s main author
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47 was in the position to negotiate access to unique written sources and human respondents and
48
49 was allowed to visit the responsible government agency in MD several times between
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51 January and February 2023. In this time frame, it was possible to conduct seven interviews
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53 with senior management (two high- and mid-level officials) and operatives (two frontline
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55 cadres and two external service providers). Follow-up conversations using online channels
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took place until the end of March 2023. Verbal consent was obtained before the interviews.

All interviews and chats were transcribed (in Chinese) and, together with fieldwork diaries and additional documents, imported into NVivo for analysis and triangulation. In line with best practices in conducting inductive, qualitative research (Eisenhardt, 1989; Patton, 2002; Miles *et al.*, 2014), data gathering and analysis took place simultaneously, with various coders being involved in the analysis that started with establishing main categories derived from the theoretical perspectives (for instance higher-level mandates, accountability requirements, capacity development). Follow-up interviews and chats, together with involving various coders, also helped triangulate data. By iterating between data and theoretical constructs, triangulating different data sources, and having intensive discussions between various coders, more specific codes and relations between codes were identified (such as relations between higher-level mandates and benchmarks, individual cadres' motivations, and the actual implementation outcome) until fitting explanatory statements were agreed upon and saturation occurred.

Results

Macro-Level Institutional Driver: Coercive Pressure through Benchmarks

In September 2021, the J provincial government required the MD municipality to initiate the accessibility upgrades, which was proposed by the national government even earlier. The provincial government's initiative was formulated as part of a performance evaluation, thus also confronting MD municipality with an enforcement mechanism. The MD municipal government immediately reformulated the provincial mandate the following day.² In May

² The provincial and municipal documents were shared by the interviewees as internal documents. For confidential reasons, more details will not be displayed in this article.

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3 2022, two provincial documents reiterated the mandate of completing the accessibility
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5 upgrades within the year (J Provincial Government Office, 2022b; J Provincial Government
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7 Office, 2022a). With these mandates, a coercive incentivizing mechanism was included: the
8
9 performance evaluation and ranking system, as one respondent stated:
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13 “Our agency and leaders treated the accessibility upgrades very seriously because the
14
15 completion counted in the governance performance evaluation.” (frontline cadre)
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19 Likewise, the local cadres in MD sought the “Web Accessibility Icon” from the ISC,
20
21 as an official recognition was essential for passing the performance evaluation:
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25 “Because the outcome will be reviewed and evaluated, we are unsure about our progress
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27 without successfully obtaining this icon and recognition.” (frontline cadre)
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31 The impact of the coercive pressure is also evident in the local agency and cadres’
32
33 subtle responsiveness to national and provincial initiatives, with the latter being the authority
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35 conducting the performance evaluation. MD did not immediately respond to the national
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37 initiatives in 2020 and 2021 but promptly issued a municipal mandate the day after the
38
39 provincial initiative. Furthermore, while the local cadres were aware of the upcoming
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41 upgrade task, they did not act until 2022, the year slated for the review and evaluation of the
42
43 upgrade results. This suggests that the responsiveness of the responsible agency and cadres is
44
45 heavily influenced by the imminence of performance evaluation.
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50 ***Micro-Level Individual Intention: Local Cadres’ Individual Engagement***

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53 An interesting observation was that the implementation outcome of the accessibility upgrades
54
55 in MD exceeded the expectation, being more advanced than the provincial government’s
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57 mandate of compliance with the standard GB/T 37668-2019. The local cadres in MD not only
58
59 met the set target but also ensured that all upgraded websites received and passed the
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3 technical tests and successfully earned the “Web Accessibility Icon” as recognition from the
4
5 ISC. This indicates the upgrades in MD adhered to *all* three mandatory and recommended
6
7 national standards. Moreover, despite the absence of specific mandates, the local cadres
8
9 continued to enhance the accessibility and usability of the municipal government portal by
10
11 adding more e-services for the elderly, even after meeting the 2022 administrative targets.
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14 We first relate these proactive measures to the local cadres’ personal intentions. For instance,
15
16 the leading frontline cadre particularly insisted on the ISC’s recognition, thus visiting other
17
18 municipalities and agencies that had already completed the upgrades for insights. Moreover,
19
20 the local cadres also planned user surveys to gather feedback on the upgraded websites.
21
22

23 These observations suggest a link between the outperformance in the accessibility upgrades
24
25 and the local cadres’ intentions, including their favorable attitude and commitment towards
26
27 the initiative and citizens’ expectations. It is hard to say that administrative command alone
28
29 could drive the local cadres to excel this far. As a frontline cadre highlighted:
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34 “Nothing can be done perfectly, and what we could do is to try our best... The provincial
35
36 authority reviews, evaluates, and publicizes our performance. However, they didn’t
37
38 evaluate the completion of the accessibility upgrades as a particular focus, which was
39
40 only counted as part of the whole evaluation of government websites... we just hoped we
41
42 could produce a good job. So did our superiors.” (frontline cadre)
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46 Although the personal commitment and diligence are appreciated, and their impact on
47
48 MD’s implementation of the upgrades should be acknowledged, the local cadres arguably did
49
50 not intend to become “pioneers” or “innovators” and showed low aspirations for e-
51
52 government innovation. Many emphasized their implementation and performance as merely
53
54 adhering to the mandates, or they may not even realize their own diligence and exceptional
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56 performance:
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3 “We were not doing something special; we were just doing something basic and
4
5 universal.” (frontline cadre)
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9 In response to why they insisted on the “Web Accessibility Icon” and the ISC
10 verification, which requires more effort than expected, a respondent stated:
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14 “We were unsure whether our upgrades conformed to these standards. Moreover, since
15 the result was supposed to be part of the annual performance evaluation, we have no idea
16 whether we are on the right track without an official verification...we need the “Web
17 Accessibility Icon” to attest our completion and compliance.” (frontline cadre)
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24 Thus, we interpret that the original and essential intention behind the local cadres’
25 commitment and diligence is to respond to the policy mandates due to the coercive pressures
26 from the performance evaluation. Concerned about uncertainties, the local cadres engaged in
27 seeking recognizable and result-guaranteed implementation solutions against the performance
28 evaluation, which motivated them to excel beyond mere target achievement. Meanwhile, their
29 stated consideration of user needs could not be denied. Hence, we propose two conjectures on
30 how individual intentions motivate the local cadres in MD to excel in the accessibility
31 upgrades: first and primarily, the local cadres may perceive excelling beyond the set targets
32 as a safer solution and more advantageous approach for meeting the performance evaluation,
33 thus fostering a favorable attitude toward investing more effort for a recognizable result.
34 Second, the claimed concern for user needs may indicate the cadres’ cognition of social
35 expectation, which incentivizes the local cadres to be engaged.
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53 **Meso-Level Organizational Variables: Enhanced Organizational Capacities**

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56 *Organizational Learning Through “Best Practice” and Peer Comparison*

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59 Of note, MD was not the first municipality to initiate and complete the upgrades in J
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3 province. Meanwhile, those who had already completed the upgrades also aimed at the ISC's
4
5 criteria rather than the original provincial requirements. We noticed that the responsible
6
7 agency in MD reached out to their neighboring municipalities and comparable public
8
9 agencies for experience learning, which aided in producing feasible plans, estimating
10
11 budgets, and approaching qualified service providers. A detail is that MD outsourced the
12
13 project to the same IT company recruited by the neighboring municipality FZ that the cadres
14
15 of MD had previously consulted. Moreover, when designing the "Senior Zone" section on the
16
17 municipal portal for elderly users, all project members reviewed and investigated the
18
19 government portals of e.g., Chengdu and Hangzhou, for insights and inspiration, as one
20
21 respondent mentioned:
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26
27 "There were no specific requirements and guidelines on the maintenance after the 2022
28
29 mandates....we could only experiment by ourselves and learn from other municipalities,
30
31 seeing how they have maintained and continuously improved government website
32
33 accessibility and reflecting on how we should do to meet users' special needs." (frontline
34
35 cadre)
36
37

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39 We interpret that when a "success recipe" for result-guaranteed implementation is
40
41 desperately needed, the experiences of the neighboring municipalities who had already
42
43 accomplished the upgrades can significantly incentivize the local cadres in MD to learn or
44
45 even duplicate their peers' "excellence." Possibly, implementing by following their peers
46
47 may have been viewed as a safer or standard solution which can enhance their organizational
48
49 capacity of implementing the accessibility initiative and meeting the institutional
50
51 expectations.
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55 Except for learning experiences, we also observed peer comparison that motivated the
56
57 local agency in MD to improve themselves and implement as much as others can. For
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3 instance, a service provider noted that some upgrade demands from the local cadres in MD
4
5 were raised by implicit peer comparisons:
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9 “Our customer sometimes may compare the upgraded layout, contents, and
10
11 functionalities of the municipal government portal with those of other cities and may not
12
13 feel satisfied. Then, they may turn to us and raise new demands.” (service provider)
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17 When commenting on why MD was so responsive to the accessibility upgrade
18
19 initiative, a respondent mentioned:
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22 “...also, because we are the capital city of the province...” (frontline cadre)
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27 Given MD’s role as a capital municipality, the local cadres may particularly be
28
29 stimulated by the achievements of peer agencies. In the accessibility upgrade case, although
30
31 not a pioneer this time, they were at least motivated not to fall far behind when compared
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33 with others. Thus, the successful implementation of the accessibility upgrade in MD can be a
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35 result of the local agency’s enhanced capacity through organizational learning. Specifically,
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37 the peers’ “best practice” experiences that the local agency in MD learned or imitated
38
39 provided them with a solution for meeting the performance evaluation and potential user
40
41 expectations. Second, peers’ achievements may incentivize the local agency in MD to catch
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43 up by following their peers’ excellence, which in turn empowers their performance in
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45 implementing the accessibility upgrades.
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50 *Supportive Organizational Arrangements* 51

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53 Organizational capacity enhanced by supportive arrangements also allowed MD to excel in
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55 the accessibility upgrades. When asked whether financial resources were available for the
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57 upgrade project, a middle-level cadre replied:
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3 “Yes, I think, because it was initiated and led by the municipal government, which was
4 strongly supportive in terms of the project itself and, thus, the financial budget. With
5 such management support, all other processes were less challenging.” (middle-level
6 cadre)
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11 This comment conveys two lessons about supportive organizational arrangements.
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13 The first is that the local cadres received stable and sufficient financial resources to
14 implement and even outperform the upgrade task. Of note, unlike other municipalities, MD
15 upgraded all local government websites collectively. In addition to other costly IT services,
16 ISC’s technical tests and verification are also chargeable. Thus, the whole project of
17 “excellence” required a large budget, and securing one million Chinese Yuan through the “e-
18 Government Earmarked Funds” made this excellence eventually happen. Most importantly,
19 the strong financial support empowered the local cadres to be proactive, including learning
20 and experimenting with the experiences of other cities and providing continuous
21 maintenance, thereby motivating them to excel instead of muddling through the project.
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34 The second lesson is about a supportive leadership setting, or the involvement of top
35 leaders or leading agencies. In the Chinese bureaucratic environment fraught with power
36 relations and sectoral conflicts, a supportive leadership setting is crucial to legitimize policy
37 implementation (Tan *et al.*, 2022), ease bureaucratic procedures, and facilitate
38 interdepartmental collaboration. As a high-level cadre commented on the challenges in
39 implementing the accessibility upgrades:
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48 “I think the first is about the government top leaders’ concern and preference. The
49 second one is about the capacity and engagement of the leading executive or
50 coordinating agency.” (high-level cadre)
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55 In fact, the involvement of the top management of MD can be reflected in the
56 municipal government office’s issuance of the local mandate. This document issuance clearly
57 displayed top management’s supportive stance on this initiative and laid a strong legitimacy
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3 foundation for the implementation, significantly enhancing the capacity of the responsible
4 agency and cadres against various implementation-related issues. For instance, despite
5 competition with other e-government projects and potential rejection, the accessibility
6 upgrade project successfully received the approval to use “e-Government Earmarked Funds.”
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8 This was strongly backed by the municipal mandate document, according to our observation
9
10 of an internal document. Moreover, this document also helped ease bureaucracy, ensuring on-
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12 time and efficient completion of the upgrades. In public procurement, service providers
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14 typically start services after the procurement contract is finalized. However, in the MD case,
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16 the IT services commenced prematurely, which was deemed “acceptable” because of the
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18 mandate document:
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27 “Yes, we initiated action first. Administrative procedures and approvals normally take a
28 long time. This is because frontline officials normally have to report what is going on to
29 their superior, which is slow...but launching the upgrades has been decided already, and
30 the policy documents are available...so after we were selected as the service provider,
31 we started to...upgrade the accessibility of the websites (before the contract signed).”
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37 (service provider)
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41 In sum, the MD local agency’s capacity was also enhanced by supportive
42 organizational arrangements, leading to their outperformance. Specifically, generous funding
43 enabled the local cadres to be proactive and made the project of “excellence” possible.
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45 Moreover, the involvement of top-level leadership, specifically by availing a mandate
46 document that conveys the top management’s stance, eased the bureaucracy and facilitated
47 the coordination in implementing the initiative.
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54 ***The Interplay Between Incentivizing Factors and Mechanisms*** 55 56

57 The empirical account of the MD’s outperformance in the accessibility upgrade project
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3 reveals a complex interplay among diverse incentives of the local responsible agency and
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5 cadres. The implementation was initially triggered by the provincial mandate. The mandate's
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7 coercion and enforcement, equipped with the performance evaluation and ranking
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9 mechanism, urged obedient actions within the hierarchy of the municipal government.
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11 Arguably, without such coercive pressure, systematic and standardized accessibility upgrades
12
13 of government websites in MD were unlikely. However, as a respondent reflected:
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18 "The question was not whether the project needed to be done but how further we should
19
20 go." (frontline cadre)
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22
23 This means that MD municipality and its cadres had no intention to challenge the
24
25 original mandates but had agency in the ways and degrees of achieving targets. Subsequently,
26
27 a set of incentives related to individual intentions and engagements and enhanced
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29 organizational capacity motivated them to excel as their approach to meet the targets. Thus,
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31 the implementation outcome of the accessibility upgrades in MD is attributed to all the
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33 incentives.
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37 Look closer, however, the outcome is far not a simple synthesis of various incentives.
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39 Rather, they are interrelated, and their interrelation further shapes the implementation
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41 outcome. As exemplified, the local cadres' intention to implement the upgrades adhering to
42
43 all accessibility standards can be driven by both the need for recognizable, result-guaranteed
44
45 implementation and user expectations. In the former case, their personal intentions appear to
46
47 coincide with and reinforce coercive pressure from the performance evaluation. Likewise,
48
49 their responses to the experiences and "excellence" of the neighboring municipalities could
50
51 also be underpinned by coercive pressure. Learning and following the "best practice"
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53 experiences of their peers could be a response to the pressure of peer comparison, but more
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55 likely a response to the institutional benchmark as such learning provides MD with a
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57 "success recipe". Thus, we can see that these incentives that explain MD's outperformance in
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3 the accessibility upgrades are strongly related and influenced by fundamental coercive
4
5 pressure generated by the benchmarks. More specifically, the mandate-based coercive
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7 pressure predominantly drives the implementation of the accessibility upgrades, meanwhile
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9 influencing the organizational- and individual-level drivers that additionally stimulate the
10
11 local agency and cadres' engagement and diligence. Conversely, personal intentions and
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13 supportive organizational conditions, although crucially shaping the outcome, are unlikely to
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15 have significant impacts without coercive drivers. Hence, their interrelationship can be
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17 portrayed as a sedimentation of coercive incentives with additional layers of individual and
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19 organizational motivations, which are likely candidates for explaining the level of diligence
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21 in implementing the accessibility upgrade initiative.
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28 **Discussion and Conclusions**

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31 This article addressed the question of how various factors relating to institutional pressures,
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33 organizational capacity, and individual intentions drive Chinese local governments to
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35 implement accessibility upgrades for government websites and how these factors interplay to
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37 shape the implementation outcome.
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41 We find that the local cadres in the case of capital municipality MD, initially were not
42
43 very proactive in e-government innovation and interpreted the accessibility upgrades as an
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45 administrative task. **Thus, as a macro-level institutional factor,** the coercive pressure from the
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47 policy mandates, especially the performance evaluation mechanism, predominantly drove
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49 them to launch this e-government initiative. Later on in the case, we find MD excelled
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51 beyond the original mandates' requirements, which can be explained from the organizational
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53 and individual levels. **From the micro-level perspective concerning** individual intentions,
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55 local cadres viewed receiving the "Web Accessibility Icon" and official recognition from ISC
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57 as a safer and result-guaranteed approach for meeting performance evaluation and responding
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3 2014; Huang *et al.*, 2017; Dias, 2020; Zhao *et al.*, 2022), has until date not carefully
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5 elaborated on the patterns underlying the influential factors and implementation outcomes.
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8 This study complements the existing literature by demonstrating and specifying influence
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10 patterns and dynamics. For instance, in line with studies that have identified specific factors
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12 or mechanisms, we illustrated that it was the enforcement measures and benchmarks in policy
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14 mandate that drove the agency and cadres exposed to performance evaluation circumstances
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16 to implement e-government initiatives. This finding also resolves the disagreement on the
17
18 impact of legislation and policies between Fan *et al.* (2014) and Zhao *et al.* (2022) because,
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20 as we demonstrated, such benchmarks are very often defined and enforced by the local rather
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22 than central government.
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26 Fourth, existing literature has rarely discussed the interrelationship among the diverse
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28 influencing factors and especially how their interplay has an impact on e-government
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30 implementation (Gil-García and Pardo, 2005; Savoldelli *et al.*, 2014; Liang *et al.*, 2017;
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32 Zhang *et al.*, 2022; Madaki *et al.*, 2024). This study suggests a sedimentation of influence
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34 factors in e-government implementation, which are likely candidates for explaining the level
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36 of diligence that supersedes outcomes set by the mandates. The sedimentation shows how
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38 various factors in Chinese local governments interact to shape the outcome of e-government
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40 implementation and challenges the view that e-government implementation in the semi-
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42 authoritarian Chinese governance system is a mere top-down process (Tan *et al.*, 2022) and
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44 drivers at the organizational- and individual levels alone can render significant impacts
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46 (Schläger and Stepan, 2017). Moreover, our findings novelly illustrate the interrelationships
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48 among the incentives, suggesting that they are not separate units in e-government initiative
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50 implementation. At least in the Chinese context, we have demonstrated that local cadres'
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52 individual intentions and organization capacity could be intrinsically linked with institutional
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54 pressures generated by top-down mandates and benchmarking mechanisms. This way, our
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3 findings also suggest that these factors may not stimulate e-government implementation
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5 equivalently in China and possibly in many other contexts. The differently weighted
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7 influences among the factors thus draw our attention to the contextual features that may
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9 significantly affect the importance and relevance of the factors that emerged in the existing
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11 literature.
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14 Furthermore, our findings provide practical implications for improving the
15
16 implementation of e-government initiatives. First, our observation of the positive impact of
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18 local cadres' spontaneous peer learning suggests that local public managers should encourage
19
20 frontline operatives to proactively acquire insights from neighboring agencies and engage in
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22 learning and development activities, with providing needed resources. Second, the finding of
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24 the responsible agency and cadres' reaction and accountability to the provincial and
25
26 municipal e-government policy initiatives shows that lower-level governments should
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28 carefully reformulate and actively translate top-down mandates with a focus on defining clear
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30 enforcement mechanisms, whilst higher-level policymakers should provide guidelines to
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32 direct the local policy interpretation and reformulation.
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38 This study has several limitations. First, research fieldwork in China comes with
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40 many challenges, and it particularly takes time and energy for overseas researchers with
41
42 limited local networks to reach out to respondents, making triangulation sometimes
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44 challenging. In the current study, this was partly remedied by having follow-up online chats
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46 and diverse data sources. Second, this single case study offers idiosyncratic insights into why
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48 the cadres in MD are motivated to excel in implementing the accessibility upgrades but falls
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50 short of explaining the lack of responsiveness in other municipalities. Therefore, future
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52 comparative studies with larger sample sizes may focus on testing determinants of divergent
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54 responsiveness across municipalities in e-government implementation to develop the
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56 analytical generalization of this study.
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