

Are You Informed? Information Exchange and Adaptive Governance in China  
Authoritarian Regimes II: Function and Flow  
Changxin (Patrick) Xu, Boston College  
San Francisco, CA  
March 30, 2018

### **Terms, Translations and Abbreviations**

Chinese Communist Party	Zhongguo Gongchan Dang	CCP
Committee of Local Chronicles	Difangzhi Bangongshi	CLC
General Office	Bangong Ting	GO
Government Administration Council	Zheng Wu Yuan (history)	GAC
Government-Organized Organization	Renmin Tuanti	GOO
Institution for Letters and Calls	Xinfang Zhidu	ILC
Office of Electronic Government	Dianzi Zhengwu Bangongshi	OEG
Office of Governmental Affairs Disclosure	Zhengwu Gongkai Bangongshi	OGAD
Office of Letters and Calls	Xinfang Bumen/Xitong	OLC
Office of Letters and Visits	Xinfang Bumen (history)	OLV

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Petition	Xinfang	
Petitioner	Xinfang Qunzhong	
Pilot Section/Agency	Qiantou Danwei	PS
State Bureau for Letters and Calls	Guojia Xinfang Ju	SBLC
State Council	Guo Wu Yuan	SC
Street Office	Jiedao Banshi Chu	SO

## Introduction

States need information to govern. Especially authoritarian states, for the absent of a formal electoral process in their institutional building to reflect popular attitudes toward the regime. In order to fill such a vacuum, the authoritarian state needs a mechanism for information gathering from society, with which the state is able to locate and further deal with civil affairs before those affairs grow and begin to rattle the regime. Avenues in which societal actors are involuntary or voluntary make plenty of information gathering alternatives for the state; as involuntary channels include Internet policing, surveillance monitoring and etc., a usual choice is to build a citizens' complaint system as a voluntary information channel.

To build and maintain such a system may be costly, however. The 2017 annual departmental budget for the State Bureau for Letters and Calls, China's state apparatus for its citizens' complaint system, reaches RMB 140.6 million yuan, 12.95 million yuan higher than that for the previous year, increasing by 10.14% (State Bureau for Letters and Calls, 2017). Fiscal support for the office has not only expanded on the state level, but on the locality level as well. For instance, the OLC of Shenzhen Municipality (Office of Letters and Calls of Shenzhen Municipality, 2017) released their budget for this year of RMB 47.47 million yuan, 3.56 million yuan higher than that for 2016, increasing by 8%.

The cost is fiscal, and even beyond. To begin with a plain understanding on how hysterical Xinfang has grown in China, a story is always the best. As Gamma, a street official<sup>1</sup> in

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<sup>1</sup> The interviewees, the exact offices where they have worked, and other substantial information that may reveal their identities are given on basis of anonymity. This interview took place through 2pm to 4pm on February 12, 2017. The street office (街道办事处) is the urban grass-roots authority in China, beneath the district level (区), which is equivalent to the township level (乡/镇) in rural areas.

S Province recalls, last year a female colleagues received a resident who wanted a higher social security payment, the budget of which the street office is not empowered to raise. Turned down and irritated, the resident refused to reason with the female official, and then in a rage he swallowed the goldfish from the female official's small fishbowl on her desk<sup>2</sup>.

How does the Chinese state gather information with the Xinfang mechanism from such hysteric societal actors? Why do the Chinese state and its individual apparatuses overcome such difficulty including high costs to collect information this way? As other information channels have been newly built by local states, is there any competition or sub-competition between these information channels? And if yes, what institutional consequences eventually will such competition lead to? Based on historical analysis and participatory observation, this paper intends to answer these questions, and argues that in increasing information exchange with societal actors and other governmental counterparts, a state apparatus may enhance its autonomy, which makes incentives for individual apparatuses to maintain its information flow immediately from society.

Previous studies mostly see Xinfang channels as a mechanism for conflict resolution (Tian, 2010; O'Brien & Li, 1995; Ying, 2001). A simple three-actor game is frequently applied, including the central state, the local state, and the petitioner (Dimitrov, 2015): the local state aims at getting promotion by improving its policy performance, and thus needs to reduce petitioning, whether by suppressing the petitioner, buying it off or fracturing the fragile alliances

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<sup>2</sup> Gamma surmises that the mad petitioner had a commonly accepted androcentric code of not hitting women. Similarly according to former interns from the provincial OLC, male officials are more likely to be attacked by hysterical petitioners than female ones.

among petitioners (Xiao, 2014); the central state needs the petitioner to grasp how the local state carries out its policy, and thereby enhance its control over the local state and improve its revered public image as a patriarchal omnipotent government who oversees all and nurses everyone's rightful interest (Chen D. , 2017), while the central state does not encourage skip-level petitioning for administrative costs and stability maintenance concerns (维稳); and whether to politicize or apoliticize the petitioning, whether to conduct skip-level petitioning or not, all options are on the table for the petitioner who change the petitioning strategy only to have its needs fulfilled, as the immediate situation changes.

Another group of analysts regard Xinfang as an approach for political participation (Yu, 2004; Minzner, Xinfang: An Alternative to Formal Chinese Legal Institutions, 2006; Fang, 2009). They argue that petitioning as a civil right has become a political convention since pre-modern China, as well as further reinforced by the communist Mass Line thought, and thus today's petitioner initially take actions to participate in politics against grass-roots administrators who violate petitioner's interest.

In addition, there are scholars who do not think petitioners initially go for political participation, and yet in their petitioning, their appeals may possibly become politicized to increase the odds that higher leadership notice their petitioning, and thus make them more proactive on the political sphere, or lead to grave political consequences such as erosion of political trust in the regime (Dong, 2010; Hu, 2007). Such politicization of petitioning may be triggered spontaneously, or in reaction to unjust/indifferent response by local states which breaches petitioners' moral consensus (Ying, 2007; Ying, 2009).

Out of previous studies, Dimitrov stands emphasizing the primary function of the Xinfang mechanism as an information gathering instrument (2013; 2015). By the avenues fostered by Xinfang institutions, the central state is provided with three major types of information, to assess its governance quality, identify corruption, and measure and create trust in the regime among the population. By comprehensively rendering the panorama of China's Xinfang, he interprets that the communist state promotes letters-and-calls work to preserve the regime in general. According to the above three-actor game, individual offices may but receive harms from letters-and-calls work, however as he also mentions, the OLCs is widespread in all levels of Party organizations, governmental offices, courts and military.

Then how comes the local states and individual offices share such a preference for the ILC to gather information? It requires further investigation on how individual offices are motivated to build its information avenues to a wider populace. To shed light on that, I may introduce previous studies on how the Chinese state is internally structured.

### **Internal Structure within the Chinese State: Proxy Accountability**

On the 1988 CCTV Spring Festival Gala, Jiang Kun and Tang Jiezhong performed a cross talk (相声), a traditional form of Chinese stand-up comedy, entitled "Adventure in An Elevator (电梯奇遇)." In this Kafkaesque story, Jiang Kun plays his fictional self<sup>3</sup>, a resident who goes and complains about poor water supply and heating systems in his neighborhood to the

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<sup>3</sup> One of the commonly used modes in cross talk is that the major performer (逗哏), which is Jiang in this case, tells a fictional story where the fictional role he plays goes by the same name, while the minor performer (捧哏), which is Tang in the case, stays outside of this story, and makes comments from time to time bringing out the gist and implications.

District Government located in a building named “Efficiency Tower.” This newly-built Efficiency Tower however has two ancient elevators in disrepair installed inside. As expected, a malfunction occurs, and traps Jiang inside.

Then, directors of the four different offices show up, and claim that they have long questioned the quality of the elevators and yet chosen not to report on it. Instead of seeking to get Jiang out, they improve his stay in the elevator in their various ways limited within their own jurisdiction. The first is the Director of the Logistics Office in charge of the cafeteria. On the basis of his jurisdiction, he makes an offer for everyday food supply, and reads his annual report to Jiang. Then, the Director of the Publicity Office attempts to take over, because Jiang as an actor should belong to his sphere of competence. Third, the Director of the Personnel Office says that he can have Jiang Kun temporarily on loan to the District Government from Jiang’s troupe. And finally, the Director of the General Office quickly summons all the cadres to an emergency meeting.

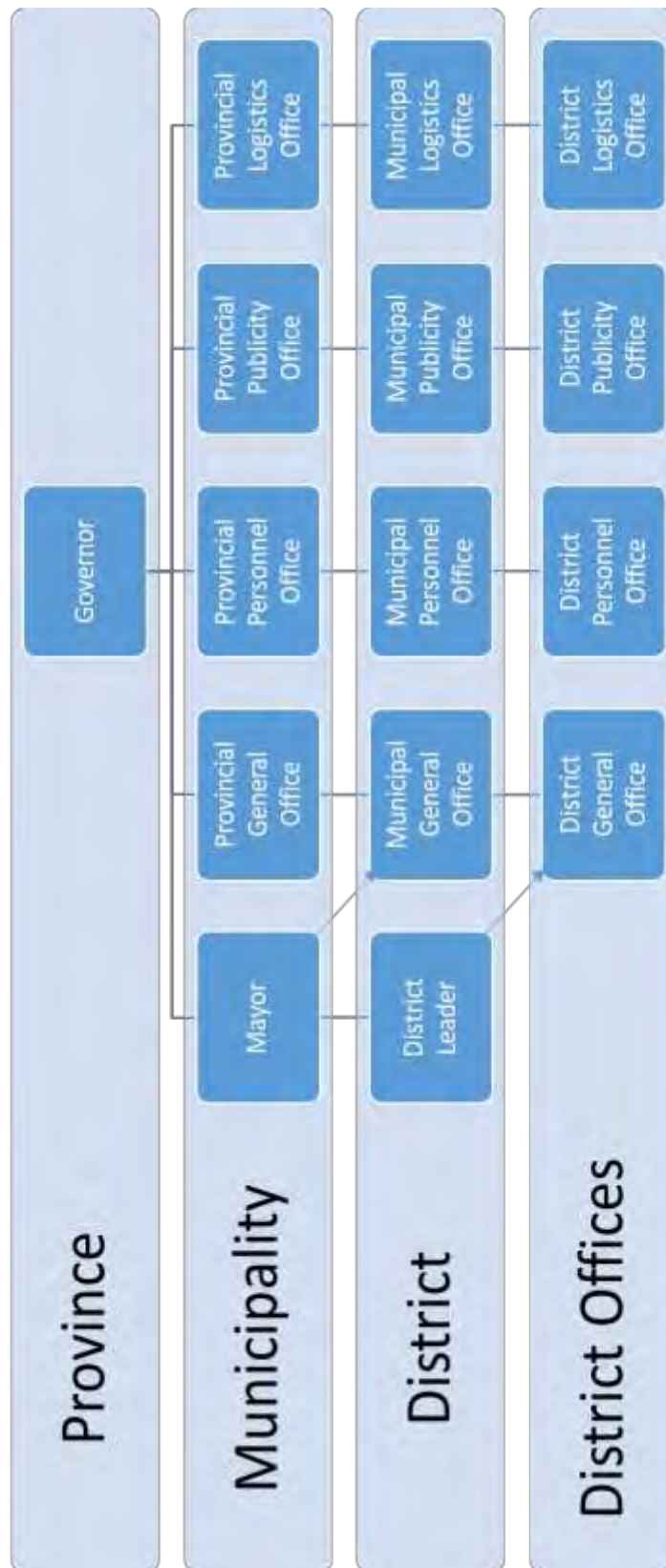
After the meeting, the Logistics Director has a fixed catering budget for Jiang, and comes back to Jiang with lunch. The Publicity Director, in order to mark this extraordinary day, decides to award Jiang with some title of honor, and eventually settles on the title of Lone Hero. The Personnel Director decides that Jiang should be treated as a township-level cadre temporarily during his stay in the elevator. As more and more gawkers cluster before the Efficiency Tower, the General Office Director decides to start selling them tickets for admission to visit this cross-talk actor trapped in the elevator.

Each Director in this story strictly limits himself to his fixed sphere of competence, even when faced with a crisis like someone being trapped in the elevator. As they remain within the confines of their competence, they reach these above decisions on a meeting and carry them out in the name of the four offices collectively. Therefore how is power *de facto* divided between these four offices, and where do they attain these powers? In answering this question, this part reviews literature debating over how the Chinese state mobilizes itself from within and its internal power dynamics.

With the four offices horizontally parallel at the same administrative level, there are two roles missing in the story, the District leadership and the superior offices. The General Office serves as the District leaders' secretaries, and being closest to the district leadership makes the General Office a coordinator of the other three, which enables the General Office Director to summon a meeting. The other missing role is the superior offices, namely the four municipal offices. An implication is that each district office in the story is under the dual instructions from both its superior office and the district leadership, as shown in the chart below. In this sense, there are two dimensions for the Chinese state internal structure: first, horizontal relations between counterparts at the same administrative level; and second, vertical relations between national, sub-national states and grass-roots authorities below.



Chart 2: A Tetragonal Hierarchical Structure of the Chinese Government



Academic consensus reached is that the Chinese state is politically centralized, as well as relatively de-centralized fiscally and administratively. According to Qian and Weingast (1997), local governments in China resist against “encroachment by the central government” and thereby shape *de facto* fiscal federalism that helps “align the interests of public officials with citizens... (and) maintain the positive and negative incentives necessary for thriving markets.” With field work in Xinmi County, Henan Province, Rong and his team bring about a concept of “the pressurized system” that later becomes widely used, which refers to the phenomenon where the local government, in order to fulfill the annual quotas assigned from above, allots these quotas to offices and localities below, and thereby divert the political pressure from above to below (Rong, Cui, & etc., 1998). Similarly on the central-local governmental relations, Landry (2008) also holds the point of view that the Party realizes effective control over officials through a meritocratic career system with a strong hold of personnel powers, as empowered officials are annually assessed with performance indicators. Zhou Li'an (2002) further studies how local officials are mobilized with promotion incentives to fulfill the annual quotas, and he later conceptualizes it as a “political tournament” between provincial leaders.

Besides, inspired by DiMaggio and Powell (1983), Zhu and Zhang (2005) also notice that unlike the United States and other western democracies, there is no distinguishing line between politicians and bureaucrats in the professional career of Chinese officials, and since different levels of governments show high consistency in departmental setup, and the resource of inferior offices' power is empowerment by superior offices, it is highly possible that superior offices may easily go *ultra vires*, and finally encroach on inferior affairs.

Then in what ways is power assigned to individual apparatuses by higher offices and/or leadership? In light of private-sector management, Zhou (2014) describes power assignment by the Chinese state as “administrative sub-contracting,” meaning that based on the principal-agent model, the inferior office as the agent is empowered to make minor specific decisions and implement them to fulfill the major goal assigned by the superior office as the principal, while the superior office remains control over personnel power, veto power, the power to intervene and other formal powers.

The sub-contracting mechanism is much result-oriented, which means if the agent manages to achieve the major goal, the principal will award the agent, ignore his procedural violations if any, and even formally or informally justify certain violations. Otherwise the agent will be criticized or even removed from office, and thus it shapes a pressurized system different from Landry’s de-centralized model. As a matter of fact, such a process of sub-contracting does not necessarily take place, but automatically comes into being based on unspoken norms. In the case of our elevator story, the four District offices are automatically empowered to address this elevator accident based on such a sub-contracting norm, unless either the District leadership or the municipal offices decides to intervene directly, whether formally or informally. Additionally, the District Personnel Director and their collective meeting, as a sub-contractor, are therefore enabled to assure Jiang’s treatment as a township-level cadre (as well as any other of their decisions), and yet, if they fail to minimize the negative influence of this incident, the District Leader and superior offices will intervene, and any procedurally irregular decision will be re-evaluated as well. Selective interventions by the central state “create a system of proxy accountability, in which the central government acts as the proxy of the masses vis-à-vis local

officials (Dimitrov, Vertical Accountability in Communist Regimes: The Role of Citizen Complaints in Bulgaria and China, 2013, p. 278).”

Similarly, Cao (2014; 2011) divides the power of the Chinese state into one “power governing state officials” and the other “one governing citizens outside the state.” As the central state firmly holds onto the power governing state officials, civil affairs and other specific tasks are left by the central state to the discretion of the sub-national states and apparatuses below, more directly faced with individual citizens and society as a whole, by which the central state can avoid its informational disadvantage and spread risks. In the story of Jiang’s elevator, many political slogans created by the central state are mentioned repeatedly by Jiang and the District officials, and as Cao would interpret, these slogans are merely “the symbolic existence of the central state.” Only “petty local despotism (Shue, 1990)” can get Jiang out.

By emphasizing the control by the central state, Zhou Xueguang (2011) finds that “administrative subcontracting,” due to its informal nature, can be withdrawn by the central state or superior offices as long as they see necessary. Whether to continue or abolish such a subcontracting hinges upon the superior office. Take Mao for example. During the Cultural Revolution, Mao compelled provincial leaders to run his political campaign by removing them from office or threatening to do so.

Zhou X. (2014) furthers his argument by analyzing the two concerns of the principal, promoting efficiency and reducing risks. When the inferior office deviates from the will of the superior, the superior intervenes to avoid losing control over inferior counterparts. A question

arises then, how does the superior and inferior offices balance the informal system of “sub-contracting” and the formal Weberian bureaucracy?

Zhou X. and Lian (2011) answer, individual offices can bargain on basis of “sub-contracting” with their Weberian superior offices during the phase of decision making. In their bargaining model, the inferior office can bargain formally via documents, or informally through personal networks, and sub-exit the negotiation if the superior office keeps pressurizing the inferior into simply obeying. Moreover, Zhang (2014) argues the Weberian structure makes an organizational foundation of “administrative sub-contracting.” Given the isomorphic institutional building, Zhang argues that less of a unitary system, the Chinese state is more a collection multiple fields; when an official is promoted, she/he is merely a beginner in the new field, and results in her/his lesser influence. Therefore, the superior office must negotiate with the inferior one to get the major policy goals achieved, and finally the superior will yield much power to the inferior in the negotiation. One way to yield powers is, as Zhang illustrates, to establish a provisional “leading entity (领导小组)” to sub-contract to fulfill a certain task.

Such a “leading entity” may consist of staff members (including directors or other leading members) from various parallel inferior offices that concerns this task or project, which shapes a more grass-roots governance mode conceptualized by scholarly work as “the Project System (Zhe & Chen, 2011; Qu, 2012; Zhou F. , 2012).” In this mode, the central state as a whole, one or a few central apparatuses initiate a bidding process for a project, that of poverty alleviation of a certain village for example, and then the local government who tenders for the project will receive a fund earmarked for this project. The central apparatuses will regularly

inspect the progress of the project, seeing the project (being) done as well as enhancing its control over local governments.

Suppose the District Government in our story were not fiscally capable of handling the elevator incident, the District would but turn to municipal offices for fiscal support, and thus result in the establishment of a project. Yet in doing so, the District's autonomy in decision making is taken by the municipality, when the municipal offices set detailed quotas and criteria for the project inspection, which costs a longer time. Another possible risk is that the municipality may make decisions unfeasible for the District to carry out, and thus it costs more time and administrative resources, an unintended consequence for the state. Consider the risks, the Project Model is more applicable to economic issues than social or political matters.

Therefore even the District leadership is absent in the story, in case the four District offices are too power-limited to help Jiang out, decision making will still fall on the shoulder of the District leadership, rather than municipal offices. In conclusion, the proxy accountability including administrative sub-contracting, the project system and etc., is mostly used to describe and conceptualize how the central state vertically empowers and oversees local states, while it is little studied how local offices coordinate themselves to fulfill the policy goals. And this is what this research attempts to clarify.

In a politically centralized authoritarian state like China, administratively de-centralized as it may be, authorized discretion for local states can always be withdrawn by the central state. And in a similar fashion, local leaders also have the power to revoke their inferior offices' decisions. Whether such revocation is taken in practice or not, as long as the possibility of being

revoked stands, the inferior office needs information regarding potential attitudes of local leaders, in case that its autonomous decision does not receive proper political commitment and support from the local leadership. Therefore, the General Office, closest seated to the leadership, stands out among all parallel offices, because the GO is most likely to pick up hints, if any, of the local leaders' policy preferences.

It brings about two implications to China's state structure and its internal information flow. First and foremost, the General Office has become a bridge for mutual communication between the leadership and other parallel offices. Of course the General Office gathers information from other offices for reference of decision making by the leadership. Parallel offices, on the other hand, take the General Office as an informal instrument to sound out policy preferences and attitudes of the leadership. Before formally submitting related documents to the leadership, parallel offices go to consult the GO to avoid criticism from above or other worse outcomes, such as their policy being revoked. A mutual bridge, the General Office naturally make an informatics apparatus where multi-directional information flows converge.

As can be seen in history, letters-and-visits work was assigned to leaders' personal secretaries, and later the OLVs were first placed within the GOs, whether in the central or local states, which was designed to deal with the above informational convergence.

Therefore the General Office Director, although placed on the parallel administrative level with other Directors, is seen as a leading member or a cadre reserved for a leading position. Put aside what it means for individual officials' career development, the second and even more influential implication is that the Director's enhanced position virtually increases the power and

authority of the General Office, and the OLVs as well. How the OLV's authority increased in history is further described in the following part.

### **Xinfang Evolving as Information Channel**

Letters-and-visits work was defined multiple times by Mao and Zhou as a part of secretary work, and thus the duty of responding to letters fell on the leaders themselves, for their secretaries did not have power to decide how to respond at first. Mao therefore had to read citizens' letters to the Party every day. Then the team of Mao's secretaries, in this regard, became the first *de facto* OLV led by the chief secretary, Tian Jiaying. Tian and his colleagues decided which letters contained information worthy of being read by Mao, and reported to Mao every three months. In the meantime, the GAC allocated all the letters-and-visits work to the newly-expanded Secretary Office, which created the precondition to set up a formal OLV. Local governments also came to the awareness that letters-and-visits work required more political commitment, which meant more specialized staff.

In March 1951, the GAC set up a new division called **the Group for Citizens' Letters** (群众信件组), affiliated with the Secretary Office (秘书处).and nearly one year later, the GAC appointed a county/division-level (县处级) cadre to this office. By design of the central leadership, the work of letters and visits was led directly by central leaders themselves. As it states in *Decision in regard of Handling People's Letters and Visits (the Decision, 政务院关于处理人民来信和接见人民工作的决定)*:



Governments of Prefectural/Municipal level and above should charge a certain section with arranging a staff responsible for responding to citizens' letters, and establish a reception office for citizens' visits; leaders should regularly examine and instruct this work (CCP Central Literature Press, 1997, p. 322).

Guided by this idea, central and local leading cadres should personally take the responsibility to respond to people's letters. As Premier Zhou Enlai instructed in 1951 and emphasized in November 1957, "there should be one leading cadre personally in charge of the work of letters and visits (Diao, 2014, p. 2)." Thereby most localities had a member from the standing committee to address letters-and-visits work in the 1950s.

Xinfang by the 1980s was characterized by its dual value demands, information gathering and in particular, mass mobilization, which was mainly shaped by the communist ideology and fear of "bureaucratism." Originated from the Mass Line ideology of this new-born revolutionary state, the value orientation of mass mobilization connotes that the Party should insightfully guide the masses toward the communist utopia, transforming society. To do so, the Party need to gain popular support for such political agendas.

Additionally, Mao along with the central leadership was aware of a grave issue they called "bureaucratism (官僚主义)," which refers to conspiracy among bureaucrats that turns the bureaucracy unresponsive to the masses. Out of such concerns, an information channel between the central state and society was admittedly needed. However, the central leadership also feared that the establishment of such a specialized informatics office would expand the size of bureaucracy and thus exacerbate "bureaucratism."

Specifically, the mass mobilization follows a skeletal multi-procedure process given below: 1) the state requests certain information from society, such as complaints about specific policy implementation; 2) with the information acquired, the central state is enabled to locate targets that will be campaigned against, such as corrupt/unresponsive officials or state workers who waste materials at work; 3) then state media finds and makes good examples of campaign targets, propagandizes the plans of the intended socio-political movement, and eventually mobilizes the masses to support or participate in the campaign; 4) finally through these campaigns, the communist state realizes a social transformation and enhances state penetration. As can be seen, Xinfang, indispensable to this process, is the only information avenue to gather public opinions for the state.

As the Three-anti campaign approached to a low period entering 1952, the state quickly tested this approach in May 1952 with a typical example of Zhang Shunyou. An ordinary worker, Zhang Shunyou from Shanxi Province spotted an anti-revolutionary suspect and then reported to local police. However, he was thwarted by local bureaucrats to better participate in the social campaigns. Repeatedly pushed away by various local offices, he decided to attempt one more time, and this time he chose to go to the North China Bureau, a temporary regional authority, superior to provincial governments and inferior to the central government.

The Zhang Shunyou Incident drew attention from regional and even central leaders. Shortly after he reported, an editorial entitled “(We )*Must Eliminate Bureaucratism* (必须肃清官僚主义)” by *People’s Daily* on May 30 1952 sharply criticized Shanxi Government as “astonishingly neglecting organizational discipline and policy regulations.” *Shanxi Daily* not

only reprinted the editorial by *People's Daily*, but quickly honed Zhang Shunyou into a model citizen who “hates anti-revolutionists so much” and “we all should learn from,” someone fearless to difficulty and retaliation.

What was ironic, once the goal of mass mobilization totally overwhelmed Xinfang channels and the OLVs, the work of letters and visits was *de facto* suspended. The masses, no longer contained by or content with any official channels, instead chose informal platforms more emotionally extreme and public to express their opinions, such as the notorious big-character poster (大字报). These posters not only was verbally fierce, but immediately stirred mass emotions for being displayed publicly instantly and thereby led to the persecution of their targets. Even some were made up to denounce the targets, it was usually impossible to undo the damage to victims' reputation. Here I list two typical posters in part<sup>4</sup>:

Secretary Guo Seeks Privileges: This February, when Secretary Guo went to relocate veterans in Fujian, he did not take comrades from the payroll section or political department to aid him in the task. Instead, he took a steward and a medical staff in his company, merely for his own comfort...It [Guo's conduct] had a negative effect. Seeking privileges is in essence a reflection of bourgeois thought.

**Policy and tactics are the life of the Party: [Interrogating] Li; The Supreme**

**Instruction:** Never forget the class struggle. 5. As a committee member of the Rebel

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<sup>4</sup> The source is “Red & Black Revolution: Dazibao and Woodcuts from 1960s China” the exhibition by Harvard's Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies.

team, why did you consult your own files when you were supposed to investigate black-list information?! – The metalworking group of the workshop

In post-Cultural Revolution years, the top priority was to rebuild the public sector that was destroyed by earlier anarchy. The Third National Xinfang Conference issued *Provisional Regulations on the Work of Letters and Visits in the Party Organizations and Government* (党政机关信访工作暂行条例) in February 1982, which stipulated that specifically which governmental sections must establish an OLV “for the convenience of the masses and related policy work.” It was also clearly regulated that a local OLV was underneath a double leadership, directed by the local Party and government as well as instructed by the superior OLV (Diao, 1996, pp. 398-402). More concretely, a municipal OLV should answer to Mayor, Municipal Party Secretary and the municipal leading body, as well as the provincial OLV who also supervises and instructs the municipal OLV.

In the meantime, the value orientations of letters-and-visits work made a sharp turn-around. An editorial by *People’s Daily* on October 22 1979, entitled *Properly Treat the Petitioning Problem* (正确对待上访问题), stated that the Xinfang mechanism was aimed at “**upholding tranquility and unity**,” and for the very first time since 1949 sounded a serious warning to petitioners that those who deliberately caused trouble would be strictly dealt with. The OLV during 1976-2000 was committed to the goal of resolving conflicts among the masses and/or between the masses and the governments. To address citizens’ complaints had been the major goal of the Xinfang mechanism since then.

The value orientation of information gathering returned, and was reinforced. In March 1986, the GO of the CCP Central Committee and that of the SC jointly issued *Circular on Enhancing the Work of Letters and Visits* (关于加强信访工作的通知), which required the OLVs should provide information for leaders, especially that in regard of economic construction and reforms (Diao, 1996, p. 308). Local governments also built their own Xinfang informational networks. Only in the 1980s, Tianjin Municipal OLV founded four periodicals<sup>5</sup> to share information gathered from society, of which two were widely circulated with all offices, one only for the municipal leadership, and one only issued to the letter-and-visits offices in Tianjin (Tianjin Editorial Committee of Chronicles, 1997, pp. 302-306, 310-312).

In Xinfang historical evolution, as the OLVs became the informational center for the Chinese state, the leadership laid more additional authorities on the OLVs. To guarantee the success rate of petitions and thus gather more information from petitioning, the power of the OLVs was accordingly enhanced. Zhou Enlai even encouraged the OLVs “**to carry the cases right down to the grass-roots level** (一杆子到底),” which empowered the OLVs to autonomously implement or supervise lower governments addressing petitioning cases (Diao, 1996, pp. 226-227).

Specifically, local leaders consistently realized such a principle, because compared to assigning another less informed office to a task, assigning the fully informed OLV guaranteed a better implementing outcome. In June 1981, a disabled female resident from Nankai District

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<sup>5</sup> There were six periodicals, and two were later fused into one weekly periodical entitled *Reflections from the Masses* (群众反映).

petitioned to Tianjin Municipal OLV about her unemployment, and claimed that she should have been employed by the No. 2 Woolen Product Factory. On July 6, the municipal OLV autonomously summoned a meeting (just like the General Office Director did in our elevator story) with the Municipal Labor Bureau, Civil Affairs Bureau, Disabled Persons' Federation, Textile Industry Bureau, and Nankai District OLV. On August 29, Deputy Mayor issued an instruction to the Municipal OLV, authorizing the OLV to coordinate with the Textile Industry Bureau and the Factory. Later in September and October, another Deputy Mayor and Mayor both instructed the OLV to address this petition jointly with the Civil Affairs Bureau. Similarly, Tianjin OLV also advised the State Educational Ministry and Tianjin Educational Office to amend their policy on university admission with related petitioning cases (Tianjin Editorial Committee of Chronicles, 1997, pp. 240, 247-248).

Organizationally derived from the GO, the OLV also enjoyed a special position where was closer to the leadership than other parallel offices, which virtually increased its autonomy and authority both in decision making and implementary processes. With informational advantage about leaders' political preferences and popular attitudes, the OLV acted as the pilot agency and the coordinator among its parallel colleagues, and even was authorized to reach some sphere of competence outside its jurisdiction.

### **Emerging Information Channels in S Province**

However, as political trust in Xinfang channels has been eroded (Dimitrov, 2015; Yu, 2004; Hu, 2007) in the last two decades, especially with the widespread Internet and social media emerging and rapidly growing, central and local states have been encouraging Xinfang

officials to keep up providing information, as well as seeking new information channels for a constant petitioning informational stream. Officially stated, citizens' complaints is the barometer to understand and assess society and popular attitudes, and information voluntarily delivered to doorstep; and thus the state encourages Xinfang cadres to work harder and maintain an open mind to all petitioning appeals (Li, 2016; Wu D. , 2003). At the same time, local governments have already taken actions to build new avenues for information gathering in place of traditional Xinfang channels. Shanghai Bureau of Letters and Calls established its own online Mailbox, as well as Mayor's Mailbox and other similar online servicing channels jointly with the State Bureau, and has run a new phone call hotline since August 2012 (Shanghai Bureau for Letters and Calls, 2016).

So has S Province. There are in general three actors within the regional state. First within the Provincial GO, the Provincial Office of Electronic Government (OEG, 省电子政务办公室) was established, responsible for the maintenance of the governmental internal electronic system and the official website, and that of the province' official accounts on social networks on Weibo<sup>6</sup>. Since later 2016, the OEG has initiated and established a Governor's Mailbox on the front page of the provincial government's website. In the meantime, the Provincial Bureau for Letters and Calls has also run its own online complaint platform, which received approximately 150 online petitioning message per week.

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<sup>6</sup> Sina Weibo (新浪微博) is one of the biggest social media platforms in China. Weibo can be seen the Chinese equivalent of Twitter, which is blocked in mainland China.

And less than two years later, the Office of Governmental Affairs Disclosure (OGAD, 省政务公开办公室) was established and authorized with a larger sphere of competence:

1) The OGAD created the Provincial Government's official account on WeChat<sup>7</sup>, and made a joint effort with the local branch of Xinhua News to maintain this account; and it has been gradually handling the account independently. Both organizations also cooperatively run a SMS newspaper via text message on regional daily political news.

2) The OGAD, jointly with the OEG and the Provincial Internet Security Assessment Center, is authorized to evaluate and assess official website building of governmental offices across the province every season, and to generate a public report afterwards.

3) The OGAD, later initiated by the Provincial Governor, has organized the Government Open Days on a weekly basis, in which provincial departments must rotate every season to participate, and the one-month Undergraduate Government Internship Initiative (UGII, 大学生政府见习) during summer vacation and winter break with the Provincial Educational Department and the Provincial Communist Youth League.

Vibrant as these information channels may all appear, they do not receive equally political investment from the provincial leadership. The Provincial Bureau for Letters and Calls used to be the OLC inside the Provincial General Office. Since 2008, the Bureau has been functioning independently out of the General Office, but equally as a department/municipal-level (市厅级) parallel department. The Bureau, leading other OLCs affiliated with governmental

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<sup>7</sup> WeChat (微信) is a Chinese multi-purpose messaging and social media app developed by Tencent, which can be explained as the Chinese equivalent of WhatsApp Messenger and/or Facebook.



departments across the province, still serves as a major informatics apparatus, and provides a considerate informational flow.

However, separated from the General Office, the Bureau lacks a steady communication avenue with the provincial leadership. In fact, *Popular Attitudes and Xinfang*, a periodical by the Bureau ceased to issue in 2004. Of all petitioning cases received by the Bureau's online platform, none went to the provincial leadership, but directly to lower localities and other provincial departments according to a clear division of labor regulated by formal documents. Of course there may exist regular reporting by the Bureau for the leadership that is not accessible for any other office or the public, and yet the shortage of such a publicly accessible report on Xinfang petitioning cases connotes that the provincial leadership are to some degree reluctant or hesitant about showing their political commitment for the conventional Xinfang mechanism to society. Most surveyed petitioners show low trust in the Xinfang mechanism and the OLC cadres, and they take petitioning as a compulsory choice due to their limited knowledge of governmental processes (Zhang & Zhang, 2009, p. 118). Consider this status of today's OLC system, it would not be wise for local leaders to express too high trust in the Xinfang mechanism, opposite to the mainstream social sense.

While both the OEG and the OGAD are installed inside the General Office, positioned close to the provincial leadership, and placed on the deputy-department/municipal level (副市厅级), there has indeed shown somewhat different treatments to these two offices. First and foremost, although established earlier, the name of the OEG director is put behind that of the OGAD director in the governmental press releases while mentioning the two offices and/or the

two directors together. The order of the two offices and their directors shows the OGAD's distinction and priority to the OEG.

Secondly, the OGAD's inaugural director has been promoted and still in charge of the province's transparency and informational affairs. By promoting the OGAD director, the provincial leadership has already apparently shown a leaning toward the. And with him promoted to the leadership, it has also contributed to a stronger informal relation between the leadership and the OGAD. In plain words, the OGAD has been enabled to deploy more intimate personal networks to exercise influences on decision making by the leadership.

Third, the OGAD's activities provide abundant chances for local leaders to publicly project themselves for more popular support. Compared to the OEG's "silent" information channels like the online Governor's Mailbox, whether the Government Open Days or the UGII, these OGAD activities make a platform, or even a stage more suitable for the Governor and Vice Governors to immediately communicate vis-à-vis citizen participants, helping improve their public images and offering them a chance to directly demonstrate their policy designs to the public.

There is a certain quota for the open days to be organized each year, for example, which is usually 40. Of these 40 open days, each one of the Governors is required to attend once a year. In fact, some Governors may not only be interested in participate more often, but intend to fully utilize such opportunities to better policy implement within her/his competence, and thus improve her/his career performance. In reality, a Vice Governor once found out citizen participants' speeches and questions were pre-censored by officials, and after severely criticizing

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the pre-censorship, he encouraged the participants present to speak out. Otherwise the goal of improving policy implement would not be fulfilled, but harmed by such preference falsification.

Fourth and most importantly, provincial leaders can concentrate the information immediately from society on a certain range of affairs without suffering from preference falsification. Governors can demand that the OGAD should invite a certain group of citizens to participate, such as state-owned enterprises workers, fruit farmers or private business persons, and organize a panel. A Vice Governor, whose major competence was private-sector businesses, asked the OGAD to organize such a specialized open days for business persons twice within one month. On the contrary, incentives appear relatively weak for the provincial leadership to participate in the OEG's online system. The Governor's Mailbox receives too many petitioning cases for the provincial leaders (and their secretaries) to go through one by one for information useful to their sphere of policy competence.

The provincial leadership has planned on building an Internet-fueled public services system where allows citizens to attain public services online, such as business licensing, and gradually put it into practice since 2016. Relying heavily on the OGAD's informational services, the provincial leadership therefore authorizes the OGAD with more autonomy. In this new "Internet-fueled Public Services System" building, the OGAD is named as the pilot agency (牵头部门) who coordinates and oversees other offices involved including conventionally powerful departments like the Provincial Development and Reform Commission (省发展和改革委员会) and the Provincial Treasury (省财政厅).

## **Conclusion**

This article attempts to draw a historical trajectory of China's Xinfang mechanism since 1949, as it notices with unique field work that local practices have already introduced new informational avenues and new informatics apparatuses for the state leaders to gather information from society for their reference. In observing and analyzing these new informatics apparatuses pave their avenue to societal actor and their regional leaders (as well as the General Office), this article argues that information exchange increases state apparatus autonomy. Counterintuitive as it may appear at first, the more informed an apparatus are, the more likely the leadership may rely on it. As the OGAD expands its information channels to society, it has earned a higher position as the pilot agency among its parallel offices from the provincial leadership.

Such increased information exchange between the state and society is admittedly good. However, its authoritarian context shall be neglected or in any way marginalized. In fact, in the structure of the proxy accountability, the local leaders intend to trigger such competition for autonomy between their major informatics apparatuses. In this game, the local leader plays both the designer and judge; informatics apparatuses are indeed encouraged for more innovative policy by the awards including individual promotion and provisionally increased office autonomy, and yet informatics cadres and officials would eventually realize that the sole determinant on which apparatus wins is the leadership's policy preferences, as the informatics officials still lack a delimited sphere of competence and guaranteed policy autonomy.

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As a matter of fact, during my field work, more than one official, whether grass-roots or department level, informational work or something else, expressed their confusion on transparency: although the SC puts forward a principle of “most shall be disclosed,” what to disclose or not is still within the discretion of the few, and the discretion may vary from individual to individual, from time to time. Such concerns regarding transparency may be perfectly projected on other affairs as well. Informal norms including “sub-contracting” and discretion by the central and local leadership may hinder state officials even more than ordinary citizens, in this fashion.

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