How Does Government Social Media Platform Play Its Role in Chinese Digital Government: Focusing on the Three Cases of Local Government Social Media Platform

Wang Bing, Graduate School of International Media, Communication, and Tourism Studies - Hokkaido University, Japan

Abstract

Rapid digital transformation and the use of digital technology and social media platforms in government are utilized across the world. The Chinese government is also attaching great importance to adopting social media platforms to create its own Government Social Media Platform (GSMP). The GSMP created by the government has gone through three stages of social media adoption in the past few years: Weibo adoption in 2011, WeChat adoption in 2013, and TikTok adoption in 2018. This paper aims to discuss the role that GSMP plays in the Chinese digital government context. And this study focuses on these three local GSMP cases, including Shanghai Municipal GSMP, Gansu Province Yinchuan GSMP, and Sichuan Province Chengdu GSMP, considering the characteristics and roles of each. In this paper, we found that the Chinese local GSMPs mainly serve the following roles: to publish local municipal government affairs and policy information; to deliver digital service to the public; to encourage government agencies to reply to the public's concerns, and to provide a communication link between the government and the public and to publicize local government to establish a good image.

Keywords: Chinese Digital Government, Government Social Media Platform, Chinese Context

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1. Introduction

Entering the 21st century, digital government is designed and operated by governments around the world to take advantage of digital technology and big data to create, optimize, and transform digital government services. The purpose is to ensure administrative efficiency and convenience for the public. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic period, governments used digital technology to make rapid policy decisions based on real-time data and analytics, and to deliver digital services to those who needed them most. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the digital transformation of public service delivery and government use of data.

Since 2002, the Chinese government has started to promote digital transformation. The first implementation was in 2002, the State Council Informatization Steering Committee issued Guiding Opinions on the Construction of E-Government. In 2015, the government introduced an 'Internet Plus' action plan which integrated mobile Internet, big data and digital technology within the economic and social sectors thus creating new industrial modes. In 2016, the government carried out the 'Internet Plus Government Services' model which has simplified administrative approval procedures, making government services more convenient and transparent. In 2019, President Xi Jinping called for the development of digital government as a national government construction strategy. Alternatively, the internet in China has rapid growth, with the number of users reaching 1.051 billion in June 2022[1] and the number of users utilizing online government services reaching 843 million in December 2020[2].

One of the most important elements in the Chinese government digitalization is the adoption of social media, mobile phone applications, and other digital technology platforms. Since 2011, the Chinese government has begone to create its own Government Social Media platform (GSMP) by using China's domestic social media accounts, mobile phone applications, and other short-video platforms. Weibo, WeChat, and TikTok are the most used social media platforms. Such GSMP plays roles in delivering government digital services, releasing government information, and providing a communication channel between the government and the people. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to discuss the role that GSMP plays in the Chinese digital government in a political context.

2. Literature Review

Lots of Chinese E-government and digital government studies, mainly in the administrative studies or political science fields discuss the design and overall operation of digital government, or the relationships in e-government communication or interactive processes among government, businesses, and citizens (Balutis, 2001a, b; Tuen-Yu Lau, 2008), or the evaluation of Chinese E-government and digital government in public service delivery quality and administrative efficiency. For example, Tuen-yu Lau et al.'s study (2008) discussed that the Chinese government maximizes service quality, enhances economy and cost-efficiency, and model of democracy in the development of e-government. They found that the Chinese E-government leaned toward a service model with their bureaus which were primarily used for economic purposes.

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[1] The data is from 'China Internet Development Statistics Report (2022)' edited by China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC).
[2] The data is from 'China Internet Development Statistics Report (2021)' edited by CNNIC.

Alternatively, most studies on social media use in the Chinese government mainly discuss how they adopt social media for self-promotion to respond to Chinese citizens participating in public affairs (Zheng, 2013; Zheng & Zheng, 2014), or discuss interactions between government and citizens (Wang & Luo, 2019), or discuss how social media delivery digital public services and evaluate social media in public service delivery (Jiang, 2021). These researchers mainly focus on only one type of China domestic social media, such as Weibo, WeChat, TikTok. For example, Jiang Tingting et al.'s study（2021）mainly focused on how WeChat was used in government service delivery and discussed the evaluation of WeChat usage.

Therefore, this paper explores the Chinese digital government and social media use, and the role that the Chinese GSMP plays in it. Chinese digital government studies provide a macro perspective for clarifying the character of the Chinese model. First of all, this paper aims to illustrate the strategy and objectives of the Chinese government to adopt digital technology and social media accounts by using the Chinese digital government approach. Second, the paper focuses on the government's use of various types of social media, not just a single type. Finally, this paper discusses three different cases of local governments using social media to present the scenario of GSMP in China.

3. Methods and Data

This paper employs case studies and online ethnological methods. Three local GSMP cases were highlighted to illustrate the context and purpose of local governments adopting social media accounts in three different cities. The case studies include Shanghai municipal GSMP, Gansu Province Yinchuan municipal GSMP, and Sichuan province Chengdu municipal GSMP. Each of these three local GSMPs is active and influential among the nationwide GSMP.

In addition, the online ethnological method is applied for this study. This method aims to consider the characters and roles of the three GSMPs by analyzing their online contents.

This study collects data from the above-mentioned three social media platforms include, but are not limited to, Weibo account, WeChat account, TikTok account, mobile applications, and internet website.

4. GSMP in China

At present, the use of social media in the development of digital government has become a worldwide trend. With the rapid growth of social media users in China, the government also attaches great importance to the adoption of social media platforms. Since 2011, the Chinese government started to adopt social media and went through three stages of development on different platforms.

During the first stage, in 2011, the government started to create its own official accounts on Weibo platform called Government Weibo. Weibo was released by Sina Corporation in 2009 and becomes the most popular social media platform in China. It is often labeled as the Chinese Twitter, and is a much more open and public platform. Government Weibo is defined that Weibo official accounts created by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) committees, government departments, courts, and prosecutors, as well as committees of local people's congress and political advisory bodies. Some of the accounts were created by

individual cadres and officials under their real names. Since its appearance in 2011, the number of it has grown rapidly. By December 2019, the total number of Government Weibo has reached over 170,000[3].

During the second stage, in 2013, Government WeChat accounts appeared on WeChat platform. These accounts are opened by the CCP organizations, central and local governments, the people's congresses (legislatures), and the committees of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (political advisors). WeChat platform was released by Tencent corporation in 2011. It is an instant messaging system much like Facebook's Messenger or Line and often labeled as the Chinese Line. At present now, WeChat is the largest social media platform in China, with over 1 billion monthly active users. In September 2012, the Ministry of Public Security of China opened its own official account on the WeChat platform, creating China's first Government WeChat. Since then, the number of Government WeChat users has grown rapidly, reaching more than 100, 000 in 2015[4].

During the third stage, from 2018, the government started to open its own TikTok official accounts called Government TikTok. TikTok is a video-focused social media released in September 2016 named Douyin. Its short videos from 15 seconds to three minutes are very popular with young people. By October 2020, TikTok had surpassed over 2 billion mobile downloads worldwide. Government TikTok accounts are created by the CCP Committees, government departments, and other authorities such as people's congresses. For example, an active and influential Government TikTok account named @ the Center of the Communist Youth League, which is owned by the center of the Communist Youth League. Since its appearance in 2018, the number of Government TikTok has grown rapidly, reaching 26,098 in 2020[5].

5. Case 1: Shanghai Municipal GSMP

The Shanghai Municipal Government News Release Office opened its official account on Weibo named @Shanghai Publication in 2011 (picture left in Figure 1). @Shanghai Publication ranked sixth among the 10 most influential nationwide Government Weibo owned by the CCP and municipal government in 2020[6]. Also in 2013, the Shanghai Municipal Government News Release Office opened its official account on WeChat platform named Shanghai Publication (picture right in Figure1). In 2017, Shanghai Publication ranked first in the influences of nationwide Government WeChat. As of April 23, 2018, the number of its subscribers exceeded 4 million[7].

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[3] The data is form 'People's Daily & Government Index Weibo Influence Report (2020)'.
[4] "Ten years for WeChat (Weixin Shinian)" https://xueqiu.com/9209504318/169704722.
[5] The data is from 'The 47th China Statistical Report on Internet Development' edited by CNNIC.
[6] The data is form 'Government Weibo Influence Report (2020)' edited by People's Daily Online Public Opinion Data Center.
[7] "Shanghai Publication ranked first in the influences of nationwide Government WeChat, with its subscribers exceeded 4 million", https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_2091714.

Fig. 1. The homepage of @Shanghai Publication (left) and Shanghai Publication (right).

5.1 The role of @Shanghai Publication

As the Weibo official account of the Shanghai Municipal Government, @Shanghai Publication plays a role in releasing government affairs information by creating numbers of hashtags such as #Policy Analyzing, #ShangHai News, #Connect Districts and Counties, #Latest News, #Focuse on Press Conference, etc. For example, the hashtag #Latest News published news about the Shanghai Municipal Digital Office issued the 'Shanghai Manufacturing Industry Digital Transformation Implementation Plan' on 8 October, 2022 (picture left in Figure 2).

Fig. 2. #Latest News (left) and #Traffic Information (right).

Second, @Shanghai Publication plays its role in delivering public service information. It also creates numbers of hashtags such as #Goodmorning Shanghai, #Traffic Information, #Weather Forecast, # Convenience for the People, #the Price for the Food, etc. For example, the hashtag #Traffic Information delivered an information about the Shanghai Passenger Shipping Corporation would implement the winter schedule from 16 October, 2022 (picture right in Figure 2).

Third, @Shanghai Publication builds a new interaction channel between the government and the public by collecting opinions and demands from the public and encouraging the government to reply to the opinions on Weibo. It also creates some hashtags such as #You Ask and I Answer, # Q&A on Weibo, #Interviews on Weibo, #Investigations on Weibo, #Reply, etc. For instance, on July 9, 2019, a citizen's question about how to deal with wet garbage was answered under the hashtag #You Ask and I Answer (Figure 3).

Fig. 3.   #You Ask and I Answer

5.2 The role of Shanghai Publication

As the WeChat official account of the Shanghai municipal government, Shanghai Publication provides digital public service to the public through the use of WeChat service account functions. It has created lots of portals that provide access to various public services (picture left in Figure4). It provides access to lookup of time for bus arrivals, lookup of traffic conditions, enrollment information, weather forecast, payment of social insurance, etc. These services include transportation, tourism, education, weather information fields, etc.

Also, Shanghai Publication always publishes government affairs information. It created a WeChat Matrix that provides access to Shanghai's 16 district official WeChat accounts, 35 bureaus accounts, and 33 official agencies' accounts (picture right in figure4). This WeChat Matrix provides an access route through which Shanghai governments at different administrative levels disclose information to the public.

Fig. 4.   Shanghai Publication provides public service (left) and publishes government information (right).

In addition, Shanghai Publication provides the government with a communication channel that gathers citizens' opinions and then replies. For example, picture left in Figure 5 demonstrates the Shanghai Municipal Bureau of Ecology and Environment responded to individual citizens' complaints about air pollution and published the results of how dealt with it.

Furthermore, Shanghai Publication also promotes Shanghai from various aspects frequently, helping the Municipal Government and the city to establish a good social image. It provides a page named I Love Shanghai (picture right in figure5) that mainly publicizes Shanghai's traditional culture and city construction, food, history, etc.

Fig. 5. Shanghai Publication's deal with citizens' complaints (left) and
I Love Shanghai (right).

6 Case 2: Gansu Province Yinchuan Municipal GSMP

In 2010, the Yinchuan Municipal Party Committee and Government opened its own official account on Weibo called @Weibo Yinchuan. Also, in 2011, the General Office of Yinchuan Municipal Party Committee and Government launched its own official Weibo account called @WenZheng Yinchuan. In February 2012, the Yinchuan Municipal Party Committee Propaganda Department and News release office opened its own official account called @Yinchuan Publication. This paper mainly focuses on these three Government Weibo accounts in Yinchuan.

6.1 The role of @Weibo Yinchuan

As the official Weibo account of the Yinchuan Municipal Party Committee and Municipal Government, @Weibo Yinchuan mainly publishes local government information and the latest policy developments. Figure 6, picture left demonstrates @Weibo Yinchuan portal that published the municipal government's announcement on citizens' opinions collection about their livelihoods.

Fig.6. @Weibo Yinchuan (left) and @Wenzheng Yinchuan (right).

6.2 The role of @Wenzheng Yinchuan

In Chinese, 'Wenzheng' means that the government seeks and collects citizens' opinions and requests through social media platform, so as to promote government agencies to respond to citizens' demands for improved policies and services. Weibo, often referred to as China's Twitter, is a more open and public platform than WeChat, thus it has attached the government's importance to its adoption for Wenzheng. As the official Weibo account of the General Office of Yinchuan Municipal Party Committee and Government, @Wenzheng Yinchuan mainly gathers citizens' voice and provides government agencies a route to reply (picture right in figure6).

6.3 The role of @Yinchuan Publication

As the official Weibo account of the Yinchuan Municipal Party Committee Propaganda Department and News Release Office, @Yinchuan Publication mainly releases public service information to citizens, and meanwhile promotes Yinchuan, helping to improve the city's good image. As seen in figure 7, @Yinchuan Publication published an official announcement about the implementation of anti-COVID-19 measures for the public.

Fig.7. @Yinchuan Publication portal on Weibo

7 Case 3: Chengdu Municipal GSMP

In 2016, the Chengdu Municipal Government of Sichuan Province created its own GSMP, which integrates various types of digital technology tools for government use. Such as publishing the mayor's mailbox and the CCP secretary's phone number on the government portal website, using mobile phone applications, and creating social media accounts. Figure 8, picture left demonstrates the Chengdu Municipal Government official portal website. In addition, Figure 8, picture right shows the mobile application created by the Chengdu Municipal Government, which mainly provides citizens with digital public services such as social insurance payment inquiry, personal tax payment inquiry, provident fund inquiry, and vaccination inquiry.

Fig.8. the Chengdu Municipal Government official portal website (left) and mobile application (right).

7.1 The role of @Chengdu Publication

The Chengdu Municipal Government created its official account on Weibo called @Chengdu Publication. It mainly publishes Chengdu government affairs and policy information. Meanwhile, it also publicizes Chengdu city to help with improving the image of Chengdu (Figure 9).
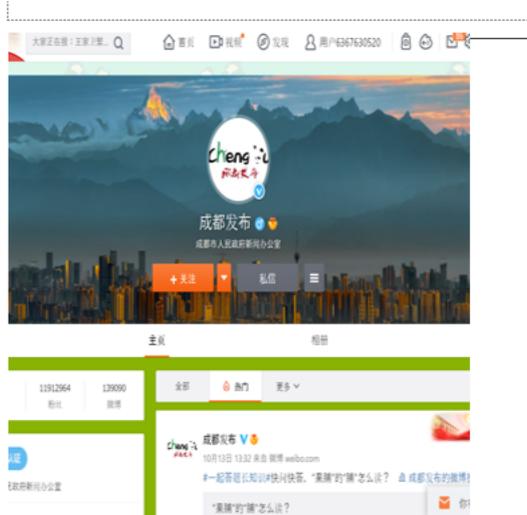
Fig. 9. @Chengdu Publication Fig. 10. Chengdu Municipal Government WeChat

7.2 The role of Chengdu Municipal Government WeChat

Figure 10 demonstrates the Chengdu Municipal Government WeChat account page. As seen picture left in Figure 11, this WeChat account creates five portals that publish municipal government affairs and anti-COVID-19 implementation information for citizens to access. These portals, respectively, are named 'Important News', 'Municipal Government executive meeting', 'Government Affairs Information', 'COVID-19 Prevention and Control Measures at Various Regions'. Also, the Chengdu Government WeChat creates five portals that help the government to collect public opinions and demands. These portals, respectively, are named 'I Say a word to the Prime Minster', 'I Want to Write a Letter', 'Inquiry by a Letter', 'COVID-19 Prevention and Control', and 'Public Opinions Collection' (picture middle in Figure11). The Chengdu Government WeChat also created four portals that provide access to various digital public services for citizens and enterprises. These four portals, respectively, are named 'Tianfu Rongyiban' (a mini application on WeChat that provides inquiry service for social insurance, traffic, map, housing management, etc.), 'Service for Enterprise', 'Convenient Service for the Public', and 'Inquiry Service for the Public' (picture right in Figure 11).
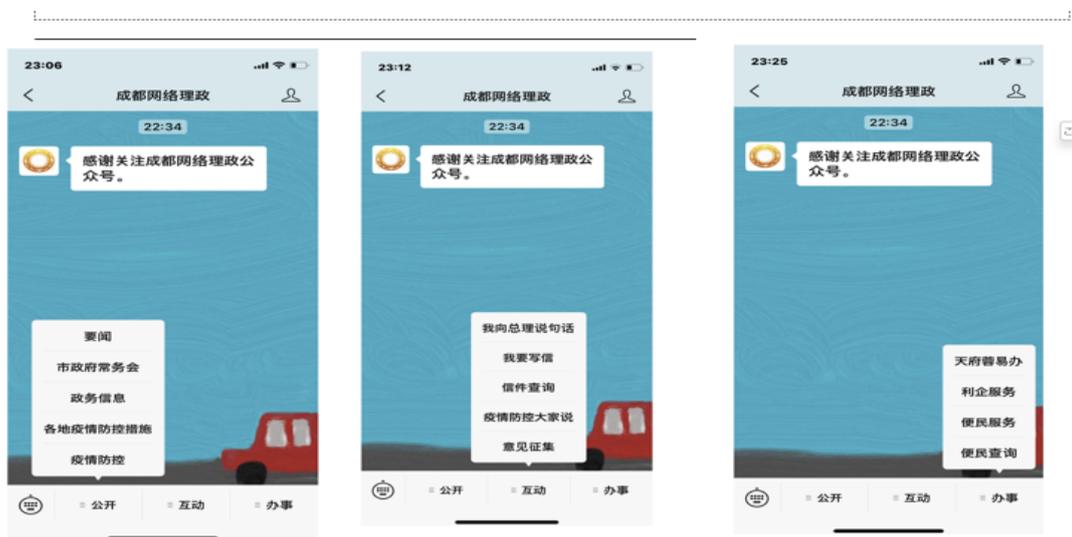

Fig. 11. the portals on the Chengdu Municipal Government WeChat

8. Conclusion

By understanding and discussing the GSMP of three different places, so as to understand the current situation of China's digital government to a certain extent, and then clarify the strategies and objectives of the Chinese government to adopt social media in the context of digitalization. With the rapid growth of internet and social media users in China, the public can express their thoughts and opinions much more actively than in the past 10 years ago. Social media undoubtedly facilitates Chinese citizens' participation in public affairs. This has driven the government to adopt social media, to gather the public's opinions or demands for enhancing its political legitimacy. In this paper, we found that the Chinese local GMSPs mainly serve the following roles: to publish local municipal government affairs and policy information; to deliver digital service to the public; to encourage government agencies to reply to the public's concerns; to provide a communication and interaction channel between the government and the public; to publicize local city for helping local government and local city to good image promotion.

Alternatively, the design and operation of digital government and how to use digital technology depends on the governments' opinions. In China's authoritarian political regime, the government is strengthening its control for internet and social media. The Chinese government's adoption of social media and digital government is emerging as a potential mode of digital surveillance that will be brought into future research.

Acknowledgements

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Contact email: WangBing@imc.hokudai.ac.jp