

*From Web to Weber:  
Understanding the Case of “One-Go at Most”  
as ICT-Driven Government Reform in  
Contemporary China\**

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**Abstract**

This article argues that the state-society relations in China’s digital era are shaped not only by the communication between the citizens and governments but also by the interactions among different levels of governments. Without formal power to keep the government in check, citizens may gain a louder voice through ICTs, yet exert a limited impact on policymaking. Based on a review of policy documents and an in-depth case study of the “One-Go at Most” reform in Zhejiang province, this research argues that the intervention of upper-level

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governments changes how the citizens and governments interact at the local level. First, the provincial party-government conducts online citizen surveys to collect information on the local governments, aiming to ensure the full implementation of the reform agenda. This strategy also equips the citizens with informal power, which forces the municipal and county governments to be more responsive and accountable with regard to efficient service delivery. Second, the provincial government has initiated the virtual government program to consolidate the new administrative procedures and standards into the cage of codes. This digitalized iron cage constrains the local cadres' discretion and establishes an e-monitoring system. The case of "One-Go at Most" in Zhejiang province provides a vivid example of how top-down mobilized digitalization can lead to a Weberian administrative system that is rational, routinized, and impartial. It is worth noting that the digital iron cage mainly exerts constraints on the administrative system. State-led digitalization does not lead to formal power sharing between the state and society. This article concludes that the digital Weberian bureaucracy leads to the consolidation of the state's infrastructure power, and the question of whether or not this will facilitate the state's despotic power requires further exploration.

While the state continues to conduct censorship, emotional demobilization,<sup>1</sup> and digital persuasion,<sup>2</sup> recent studies have increasingly recognized that the state-society interaction is growing increasingly complex in China's cyberspace. Scholarly work on censorship notes that the state silences expressions that "represent, reinforce, or spur social mobilization" but allows criticism of the government.<sup>3</sup> Observers of the Chinese government further demonstrate that the government may use online information to improve public policy,<sup>4</sup> fight corruption,<sup>5</sup> and even introduce coproduction for quality e-government websites.<sup>6</sup> Despite this seemingly promising progress, the empirical works present a nuanced picture of citizen-government interactions. While some confirm the association between the diffusion of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and higher government expenditure on social policy and the improved bureaucratic-administration operation,<sup>7</sup> others argue that the Internet serves more as a tool for enhancing control,<sup>8</sup> and exerts merely a marginal influence on government transparency.<sup>9</sup> These findings suggest that the government's responsiveness to online participation is selective,<sup>10</sup> varies across regions,<sup>11</sup> and differs by cases.<sup>12</sup>