

*The Regime's New Approach to its Representative Claim in the Digital Era: A Case Study of the "Visit Once" Reform in China**

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Abstract

In representation studies, an ongoing debate revolves around whether a non-Western democratic regime can promote representation to win the public's trust and enhance its political legitimacy. Although conventional literature frames this question within the context of legislature-constituency relations, this article broadens the analytical dimension to incorporate a political party's representative claim based on digital connectivity and demand responsiveness. Using the case of China, we explore how a ruling party puts its "people-centered" representative claim into practice through digital technology. Our study focuses on a

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service reform in Zhejiang province known as the “Visit Once” reform. The Communist Party of China utilizes digital technology to legitimize its “people-centered” claim of representation. Through digital means, the ruling party (representative) better perceives the needs of the people (represented), enabling the provision of government services with more accurate and timely information.

For decades, representation research has held a crucial position in politics and government studies.¹ In recent years, some researchers strongly argue that representation should extend beyond Western democratic contexts to encompass non-Western democratic settings.² The existing literature on representation under those regimes predominantly maintains its focus on the legislature-constituency, such as the People’s Congress of China,³ the Parliament of Singapore,⁴ and the Iranian Majles.⁵ However, certain critical elements of representation in a non-Western system elude capture through specific forms of representation; the representative claim of the ruling political party is the most prominent. How does a ruling party, asserting to represent the people’s will, enhance representativeness, especially in the digital era, where the authority, the public, and their relationships are increasingly mediated and shaped by digital technology?⁶

This research aims to broaden our understanding of representation by exploring how the Communist Party of China (CPC) put into practice its “people-centered” representative claim through the adoption of digital technology—a global trend in administration and politics.⁷ This study examines representation in the “Visit Once” reform in Zhejiang province.⁸ We conducted six rounds of fieldwork from February 2017 to December 2019. Our methodology includes exploratory case studies,⁹ featuring 32 semi-structured interviews with leading officials of the CPC and government agencies at the provincial and municipal levels in Hangzhou, Quzhou (衢州), Huzhou (湖州), and Yiwu (義烏),¹⁰ as well as interviews of university scholars and individual residents, thus including both representatives and the represented. Additionally, we analyzed official documents and data at both provincial and municipal levels.

The findings show that the adoption of digital technology diminishes information asymmetry between the representatives and the represented. The improvement in the analytical capacity of the ruling