The China Quarterly (2026), 1–17
doi:10.1017/S0305741026102550

RESEARCH REPORT

Rising Engagement and Substantive Responsiveness: 13 Years of Online Petitioning in China

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Abstract
The Chinese government has invested heavily in online petition platforms to channel public grievances, yet systematic longitudinal evidence on citizen–state interactions within these venues remains limited. This research report presents nationwide evidence showing that both public participation and government responsiveness through e-petition institutions have increased markedly since Xi Jinping took office. Analysing more than four million citizen appeals submitted to the country's largest online petition portal, Message Board for Leaders, from January 2011 to January 2024, we find a twelvefold rise in petition volume and a fivefold increase in users, largely driven by urban residents in eastern provinces. Appeals have also diversified, with notable growth in housing-related issues and more strategic appeals directed at Party secretaries. Meanwhile, local governments have raised response rates from 50 per cent to 98 per cent, shortened average wait times from 176 to 19 days, and increased the substantive resolution rate from 17 per cent to 31 per cent over the past decade.

摘要
中国政府近年来大力投资网络信访平台, 以引导民众表达诉求, 但关于这些平台上公民 – 国家互动的系统性纵向证据依然有限。本文提供跨越十余年、覆盖全国的证据, 表明自习近平主政以来, 公众参与和政府在电子信访制度中的回应性均显著提升。通过分析 2011 年至 2023 年间提交至中国最大在线信访平台 "人民网领导留言板" 的四百余万条公民诉求, 我们发现留言总量增长了 12 倍, 用户数量增长了 5 倍, 这一增长主要由东部省份的城市居民所驱动。诉求议题亦日益多元化, 其中住房相关议题增长尤为显著, 且越来越多的诉求被策略性地直接提交给党委书记。与此同时, 地方政府的回应能力亦明显增强:回复率从 50% 提升至 98%, 平均回复时间从 176 天缩短至 19 天, 实质性解决率在过去十年间也由 17% 提高至 31%。

Keywords: authoritarian governance; complaints; e-government; political participation; responsiveness; text-as-data; *xinfang*

关键词: 威权治理; 投诉; 电子政务; 政治参与; 回应性; 量化文本分析; 信访

Since Xi Jinping 习近平 took office in November 2012, the Chinese regime has expanded its efforts to steer public expression of grievances away from contentious activism and towards state-run petition institutions (*xinfang* 信访).[1] Under Xi, the state has intensified repression of unsanctioned contention while simultaneously elevating the National Complaints and Proposal Administration to ministerial status, legally mandating officials to respond to citizen petitions, and deploying online

1 Fu and Distelhorst 2018; Göbel 2020; Pei 2020; Qiaoan and Teets 2020; Zhao 2016.

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appeal platforms more extensively than at any previous point in the history of the People's Republic of China (PRC).[2]

Despite this institutional expansion, systematic longitudinal evidence on how citizens and officials interact within petition institutions remains scarce. In particular, it is unclear whether – and if so, how – citizens have deepened their engagement with these institutions over time, for example by reporting a wider range of issues or appealing to a more diverse set of authorities. We also know little about how engagement with these institutions varies across socio-demographic groups.

Equally important, existing research offers limited evidence on whether government responsiveness within petition institutions has improved over time, especially when responsiveness is defined as substantive resolution of citizens' problems. Understanding longitudinal trends in government resolution is important because, given the state's active promotion of these institutions, failure to provide substantive assistance risks eroding public confidence in state commitments and, over time, institutional legitimacy. Without longitudinal evidence on both citizen participation and government responsiveness, it remains difficult to assess whether the regime's investment in petition institutions has meaningfully reshaped citizen–state engagement or merely expanded appeal channels without improving outcomes.

To address these gaps, this research report presents decade-long, nationwide evidence of changes to citizen participation and government responsiveness within official petition institutions. We do so by systematically analysing the content, petitioner characteristics and official responses associated with more than four million citizen appeals submitted between 2011 and 2023, inclusive, to the Message Board for Leaders (*Renminwang lingdao liuyanban* 人民网领导留言板, MBL hereafter), China's largest online petition platform. We find that over these 13 years, the platform recorded a twelvefold increase in petition volume and a fivefold increase in unique petitioners, driven largely by urban residents from economically developed eastern provinces. The scope of requests also broadened considerably, with the most rapid growth occurring in housing and property-related requests. At the same time, our results show that petitioners became more strategic, contacting a wider range of subnational authorities and increasingly directing their appeals to Party officials rather than their state counterparts. Finally, we find that this expansion of citizen participation was accompanied by greater government responsiveness. Between 2011 and 2023, the official response rate to MBL appeals rose from 50 per cent to 98 per cent, while the average response time declined from 176 days to 19 days. More importantly, the share of appeals receiving a substantive resolution nearly doubled, increasing from 17 per cent to 31 per cent.

Our findings contribute to the scholarship on public participation, e-governance institutions and state responsiveness in authoritarian regimes, much of which focuses on explaining the causes of government responsiveness.[3] We extend this literature by presenting a longitudinal perspective on online citizen engagement and official responsiveness, tracing the use of a major e-petition institution across Xi Jinping's first 12 years in power. Although heightened repression has been a feature of Xi's rule,[4] and prior research emphasizes that autocrats use petition institutions primarily to reinforce political control rather than serve the public,[5] our analysis suggests that over the past decade, these institutions have become more effective in resolving reported grievances while simultaneously attracting broader public engagement. Additionally, this study shows that the MBL dataset,

2 Central Cyberspace Commission 2019; Chen, Jidong, et al. 2025; Göbel and Li 2021; Hu, Gong and Zhao 2025.

3 See Cai 2010; Cai and Zhou 2019; Chen, Jidong, Pan and Xu 2016; Chen, Xi 2012; Distelhorst and Hou 2017; Hartford 2005; He 2025; Heurlin 2016; Truex 2016. A number of studies examine responsiveness on the MBL during the platform's early years, before or at the beginning of Xi's rule (Jiang, Meng and Zhang 2019; Li, Liu and Meng 2019; Meng and Yang 2020; Su and Meng 2016; Zheng and Meng 2021). For a comparison of our findings with these studies, see the online Appendix A.1.1.

4 Fu and Distelhorst 2018.

5 Chen, Xi 2012; Gueorguiev 2021; Lueders 2022; Malesky and Taussig 2019.

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which previously was primarily used for aggregate analysis of responsiveness, can inform longitudinal analyses of both citizen participation and state responsiveness, as well as facilitate research into how these longitudinal dynamics vary across issue areas and geographic regions. We highlight the additional opportunities that this dataset offers for qualitative and quantitative research on Chinese state–society relations in the conclusion.

Empirical Strategy

To understand the longitudinal trends in online appeals, we collected all citizen appeals and government responses published on the MBL from January 2011 up to and including January 2024. In total, we gathered 4,418,264 appeals and 3,724,987 responses.[6] The MBL was launched in 2008 by the official website of *People's Daily* (People.cn, *Renminwang* 人民网). It aims to offer a national online portal for citizens to contact officials at provincial, prefectural and county levels.[7] Each of the subnational MBL platforms across China hosts two message boards: one for Party leaders and the other for government leaders. Individuals can post a variety of appeal types (complaints, enquiries and suggestions) to these message boards.[8] Figure 1 shows a snapshot of the Beijing government's MBL.

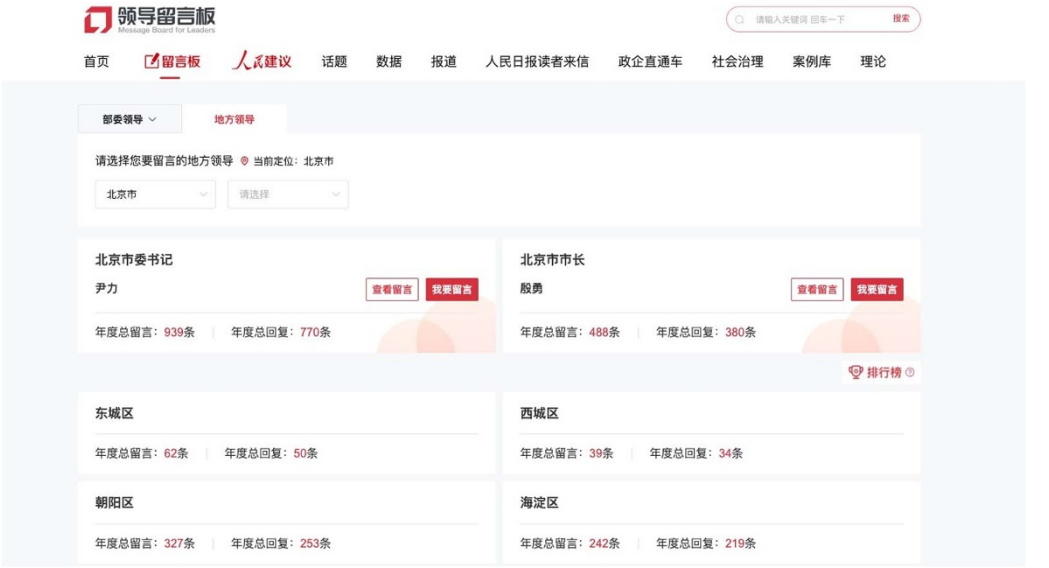

Figure 1. MBL Appeal Submission Portal to Beijing Officials

Several features of the MBL appealed to us as a primary data source. First, it has been in operation for over 17 years and covers all localities in China at and above the county level. This comprehensiveness provides the opportunity to compare patterns of public participation and government responsiveness across regions and over an extended period of time, a capability that local-level platforms are unable to provide. Second, since its creation, national media outlets have promoted the

6 We acquired these data from a commercial data provider that archives publicly available appeals, government responses and associated metadata on the MBL platform. The provider systematically collects MBL content at scale using automated collection tools.

7 Starting in 2022, citizens can also submit appeals to central-level bureaus on the MBL. This paper does not include appeals to government officials in Hong Kong or Macau.

8 Following previous research on petition platforms, we use "petitions," "appeals" and "requests" to refer to these submission types collectively.

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MBL as the primary portal for petitions, including by publishing notable petitions on the People.cn homepage daily.[9] Such exposure means that citizens across China are likely to be aware of the platform. Third, given that the MBL is administered by a central agency, local officials cannot selectively display or delete posts, as they often do on local-level platforms.[10] In their interviews with MBL staff, Junyan Jiang and colleagues found that the platform only blocks citizen requests if they contain explicit criticism of central government leaders, vulgar language or dissent directed at national-level policies.[11] These attributes – national publicity, comparability between localities and across time, and robustness to local interference – position the MBL as a primary data source capable of facilitating a macroscopic and largely complete picture of citizen–government online interactions across China. For additional data validation, see the online Appendix A.1.1.

We collected the full text and a rich set of metadata for each appeal submitted to the MBL, including submission time, issue area (as chosen by the petitioner), petitioner IP address, organization and official to which the appeal was submitted, and the official's response text and response time (if any).

We use these data fields to assess the scale and depth of citizen engagement with the MBL, as well as the responsiveness of government. Specifically, we measure citizen engagement via petition volume, user geographies, topic diversity and petitioners' strategy in whom they address to resolve their problems. We measure government responsiveness by how quickly the government responds, and whether those responses substantively resolved the reported issues. We detail these operationalizations in the next three sections.

Analysing petitioner geographies

Given the economic inequalities across provinces and between rural and urban areas in China, a Chinese citizen's residential location is often strongly associated with their socio-economic status. As a result, assessing the geographic distribution of MBL petitioners can provide clues about which socio-economic strata engage most frequently with digital petition institutions, and how these strata may have changed over time.[12]

To calculate petitioners' locations, we used geographic information system (GIS) techniques to match each petitioner's IP address to a specific county (*xian* 县) or district (*qu* 区).[13] Specifically, we used IP-to-location lookup tools to generate latitude and longitude estimates for all 512,767 unique IP addresses in the dataset.[14] We then placed these location coordinates inside a shapefile (a geospatial map showing the latitudes and longitudes for all Chinese administrative borders) to generate their corresponding administrative locations. Our method successfully linked 97.6 per cent of IP addresses to a Chinese county or district. Another 0.4 per cent of IPs pointed to locations outside of mainland China, and the remaining 2 per cent were from private networks or other de-identified IP addresses that did not generate location coordinates. For additional details, see online Appendix A.1.2.

In the second step, we coded the locations of those 97.6 per cent of petitioners whose IP addresses identified a specific county or district into two variables: a "rural" variable, indicating whether the petitioner lives in a rural locality,[15] and an "IP province" variable, indicating which province the petition emanated from. Previous studies have used these two geographical attributes as proxies for

9 See "Lingdao liuyan ban" (MBL). *Renmin wang*, https://bit.ly/3FivqPA.

10 Meng and Yang 2020; Dimitrov 2023.

11 Jiang, Meng and Zhang 2019.

12 Other metadata of petitioners, such as their age and gender, are not recorded by the MBL platform.

13 IP addresses published by the MBL are anonymized at the final octet (e.g. 112.123.207.*), which makes county and district the most granular levels at which we can locate individual petitioners.

14 We used https://ipgeolocation.io/ and https://ipapi.com/, two widely used IP lookup tools.

15 Following prior research, we code a locality as "rural" if over 50 per cent of its population are rural residents (*xiangcun renkou*), based on *China County Statistical Yearbooks, China City Statistical Yearbooks* and the *2020 National Population Census* (Bernstein and Lü 2003; Chen, Jidong, Pan and Xu 2016).

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socio-economic status.[16] Compared to residents in rural areas (inland provinces), people living in urban areas (coastal provinces) are, on average, wealthier, better educated and have access to better social welfare.

Classifying appeal topics

We used a structural topic model (STM) – an unsupervised machine learning algorithm – and human validation to classify appeal topics. STM is widely used for text classification in social science research owing to its transparency, precision and replicability. Like most unsupervised topic models, estimating STM involves researcher discretion for some parameter values and hence demands human validation.[17]

We followed three steps to implement STM on appeals. First, we randomly sampled 2 per cent of our data (87,895 citizen appeals) using stratified sampling by year. We only applied STM to this random subset because a larger sample would have been too computationally expensive for the algorithm to handle. Next, we selected the STM model size that produced the most coherent topic choices. To do so, we estimated a series of 46 STM models with an increasing number of topics, starting at five and continuing to 50. Among these 46 models, we selected the 11-topic model on the basis of semantic coherence and topic exclusivity.[18] Finally, for each of the 11 topics from the chosen model, two Chinese speakers independently selected a topic label based on the topic's keywords and most representative appeals. The two coders agreed on labels for 9 out of the 11 topics. We also prompted a large language model (GPT-4o) to label the 11 topics by querying it with the same STM output that the human coders reviewed.[19] GPT agreed with each coder on 10 out of 11 topics; we used GPT's labels for the two topics on which the coders disagreed. Table 1 shows the final labels of the 11 appeal topics.

Table 1. Appeal Topics from STM

Topic	Label
1	Transportation
2	Education
3	Employment and Wages
4	Government Corruption
5	Pollution
6	Utilities
7	Healthcare/COVID−19
8	Property Management
9	Property Development
10	Rural Development
11	Civil Service Exams

We conducted a variety of tests to assess the validity of these algorithm-generated topic clusters. First, we measured the stability of our preferred model (K=11) by re-estimating it ten times with the same parameters and different random initializations. Results suggest that the model's stability is moderately strong, with the average correlation of topic proportions being 0.5 (on a scale of -1 to 1) across runs. Second, to assess whether STM-generated topics adequately reflect appeal content, we

16 Vortherms 2023; Yang and Zhao 2015.
17 Roberts et al. 2014.
18 Ibid.
19 Kozlowski, Pradier and Benz 2024.

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conducted three validation tests – word intrusion, word set intrusion and topic intrusion – for our chosen model (K=11) and three alternative models (K=20, 30, 50).[20] Across the three tests, the chosen model's performance exceeds all tested alternatives as well as the benchmarks suggested in the literature,[21] indicating that it assigns the most accurate topics to appeals among the tested models. Additionally, we asked two experts on Chinese citizen appeals to develop their ideal topic categories without reference to the STM results. These expert-derived topics largely align with the STM-generated topics, and indeed, they overlap on nine of the 11 topics in Table 1. For additional details of model validation, see online Appendix A.2.

It is important to note that these tests should not be interpreted as evidence that the machine-generated topics in Table 1 are objective or uniquely correct. To create topic proportions, STM assumes that all documents are generated from a fixed distribution of "latent" topics, an assumption which, while useful for researchers, is an oversimplification of the text generation process. In addition, the results of STM, like other unsupervised models, depend on random initializations and researcher-set model parameters, which inevitably reflect some degree of researcher discretion and randomness. Therefore, we encourage readers to treat these algorithmically generated results as a useful high-level summary but to interpret them with caution.

Assessing government responsiveness

We define government responsiveness as the timely and substantive resolution of a citizen's appeal. We measured timeliness using the hours elapsed from request submission to government response. To assess substantiveness, we combined human annotation with supervised machine learning to independently evaluate whether each official reply resolved the reported issue.[22] First, we asked two Chinese native speakers to independently code a random sample of 1,760 petition–response pairs, labelling whether the issue reported by each petitioner had been resolved. We define a petition as "resolved" if the responding official explicitly describes how they delivered the goods and/or services requested by the petitioner, penalized the actor responsible or halted the reported behaviour; otherwise, the petition is coded as "unresolved" (see online Appendix A.3 for the full coding rubric and example responses). The inter-coder agreement for this sample was 86 per cent.

We then trained and validated a deep learning classifier (Chinese DeBERTa with Whole Word Masking) to extend this human coding to the entire dataset. The model was trained on 74 per cent of the human-annotated sample and evaluated on the remaining 26 per cent, achieving an acceptable F1 score of 0.76 in reproducing human coding decisions. We then applied this classifier to the remaining unlabelled petition–response pairs (over 3.7 million) to code whether the responses resolve the reported issues.

Results

We find that over the studied time period, the Chinese public substantially increased its engagement with the state-sanctioned MBL petition forum, as evidenced by rising volumes of petitions and petitioners, greater diversity of appeals and the more strategic selection of petitioned officials. Alongside this surge in citizen participation, we find that local authorities also become more responsive.

20 These tests were completed using R's Oolong package (Chan and Sältzer 2020).

21 Chang et al. 2009; Ying, Montgomery and Stewart 2022.

22 The MBL platform explicitly discourages repeated submissions, meaning each appeal effectively has one opportunity for resolution. The platform policy states that "Appeals with overlapping content – whether from the same user or different users – will not be processed" (*Liuyan sheji yixia neirong jiang wufa huode banli: shu yu chongfu liuyan de, baokuo (dan bu xianding yu) tong yi yonghu jiu tong yi shixiang chongfu liuyan, butong yonghu jiu tong yi shixiang/duixiang liuyan*). This policy is displayed prominently before users submit a request. Consistent with this, we find that only 4.6 per cent of appeals share 80 per cent or more identical text with any other appeal.

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Petition and user volumes increase

The number of petitions lodged on the MBL grew from 52,750 appeals in 2011 to 653,498 appeals in 2023. Figure 2 shows that the number of appeals steadily increased from 2011, peaking at 812,232 posts in 2021. The drastic growth between 2020 and 2021 may reflect heightened citizen grievances and reduced participation options, particularly offline activities, during the COVID-19 pandemic and government lockdowns. Meanwhile, the small dip in 2022 and 2023 may be related to the MBL's August 2022 requirement that all users register their national ID number before lodging a new petition.[23] Petition volumes increased across all 31 provinces between 2011 and 2023, with the smallest growth occurring in Hunan (2.2 times larger) and the largest in Yunnan (39 times larger). Henan remained the top source of appeals throughout these 13 years.

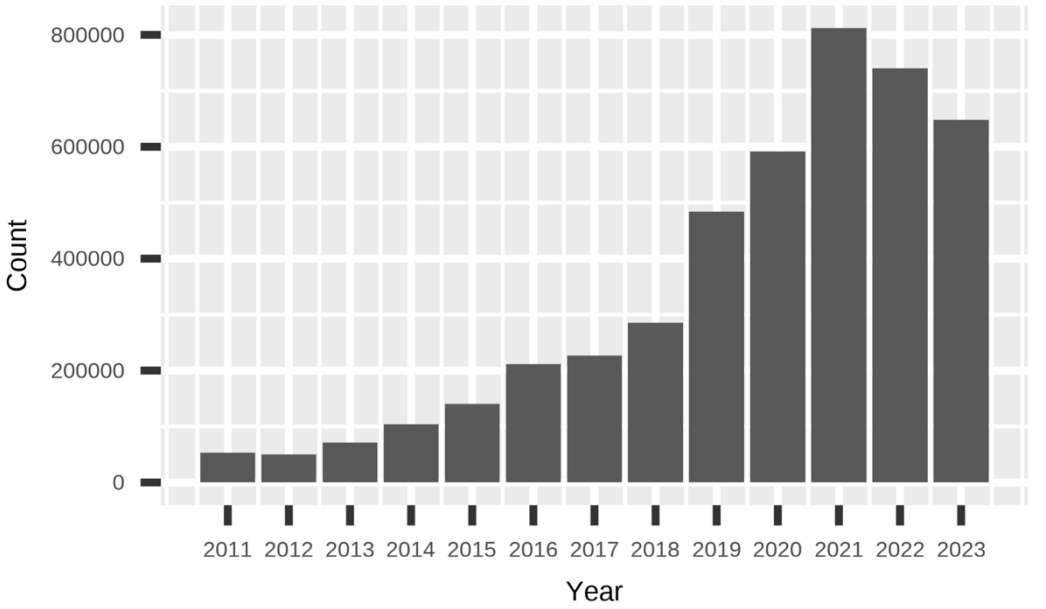

Figure 2. Number of Petitions by Year, 2011–2023

We find that this rise in petitions occurs alongside an expansion of users on the platform. Figure 3 presents the number of unique IP addresses submitting requests to the MBL by year. Over Xi's first two terms (2012–2022), the number of unique user IP addresses proliferated, from 34,387 to 203,911 (4.9 times larger). This growth rate far outpaces the growth of internet penetration (19 per cent) and national population (4.4 per cent) over the same period.[24] Moreover, the number of unique users on the MBL is probably even more substantial than the number of IP addresses, as a single IP can serve thousands of users on shared networks.[25] We emphasize, however, that rising numbers of users and petitions do not by themselves signal greater institutional efficacy or robustness. Rather, we interpret these trends as evidence of increased citizen engagement with online petition institutions.

23 This policy follows the June 2022 enactment of "The provisions on the administration of internet users' account information" (*Hulianwang yonghu zhanghao xinxi guanli guiding*). See "Lingdao liuyan ban" (MBL). *Renmin wang*, https://bit.ly/414s5e4.

24 China's total IP addresses grew from 330.5 million to 391.8 million between 2011 and 2023, based on the annual *Statistical Report on Internet Development in China* (www.cnnic.com.cn). The country's population growth is based on World Bank data (https://bit.ly/4nQOtRz).

25 See online Appendix A.1.2.

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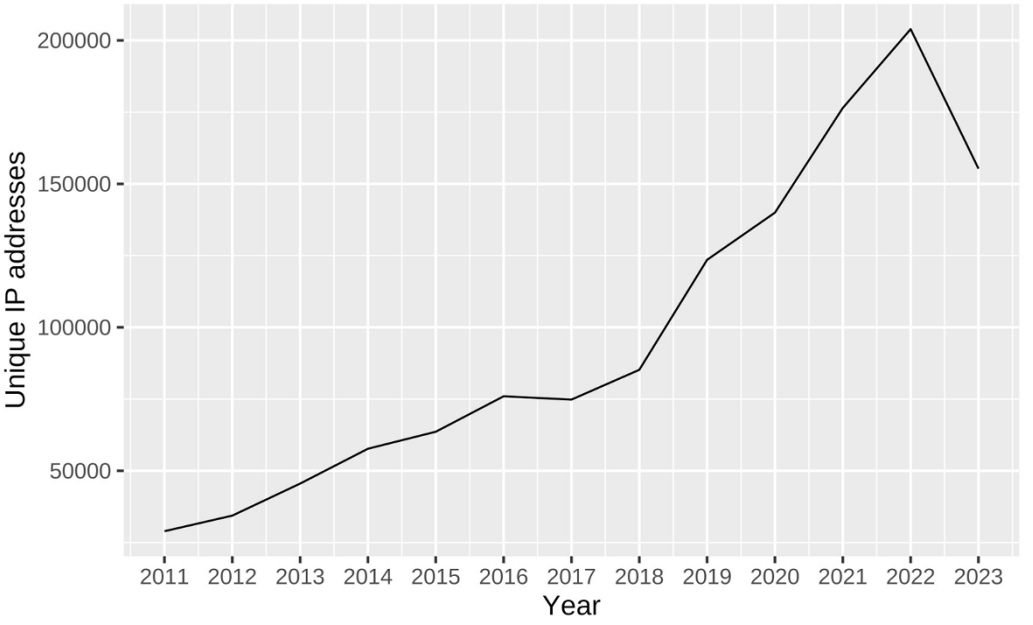

Figure 3. Number of User IP Addresses on MBL by Year

Who has driven the growth in MBL users over the past decade? We find that new users are predominantly urban residents from eastern provinces. Figure 4 shows the percentage of appeals emanating from rural counties by year.[26] Until 2014, nearly 50 per cent of appeals originated from rural areas. This percentage, however, dropped to less than 40 per cent during Xi's second five-year term. Figure 5 presents the yearly volume of petitions by eastern, central and western provinces (left panel), as well as petition growth by province between 2012 and 2023 (right panel). The results show that in the first five years of Xi's rule, petition growth remained relatively even across east, central and west China. Starting in 2020, however, petition growth in the east accelerated, rising to 46 per cent of all appeals in 2023. Consistent with this trend, the right panel shows that eastern provinces witnessed faster petition growth than the national growth rate over the past decade.

The increase in the number of eastern users posting on the MBL is unlikely to be driven by migrants originating from inland provinces and working in eastern cities. Figure 6 shows the percentage of petitions sent from a user IP in eastern provinces to an official in western or central provinces – and vice versa – by year. We interpret that these cross-region appeals are likely to have been submitted by migrants either petitioning their hometown governments (east-to-west) or the governments in their workplaces (west-to-east).[27] Between 2016 and 2023, the combined share of these cross-region appeals declined, from 27.5 per cent to 13.5 per cent. Since the early 2000s, the growth of the migrant population has been accompanied by a dramatic rise in social contention.[28] Our results imply that starting from Xi's second term, migrants to the more developed east appear to have decreased engagement with online petition institutions relative to other population groups, even as overall platform participation continued to expand.

26 We did not include 2011 in the analyses using IP address because its share of Beijing IPs is much higher than in other years, implying that user IPs might not be properly recorded in the platform's early years.

27 We also analysed appeal inflows and outflows by province and find that eastern provinces mostly experienced more appeals sent out than received from other provinces (net outflow), while western and central provinces experienced the opposite (net inflow). For details, see online Appendix A.4.

28 Fu 2018.

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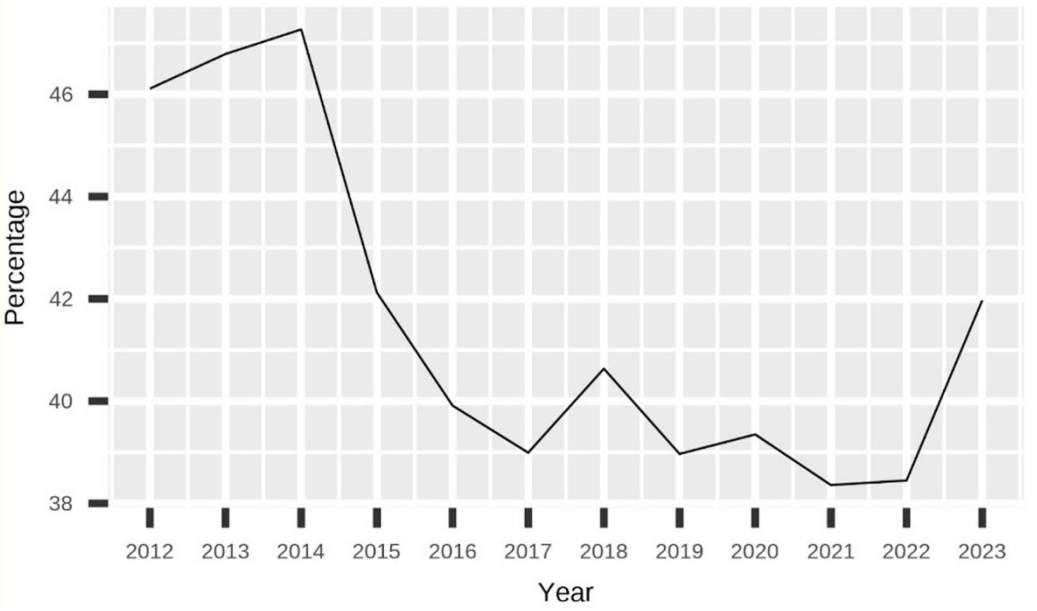

Figure 4. Share of Appeals Emanating from Rural Counties (Based on IP Address)

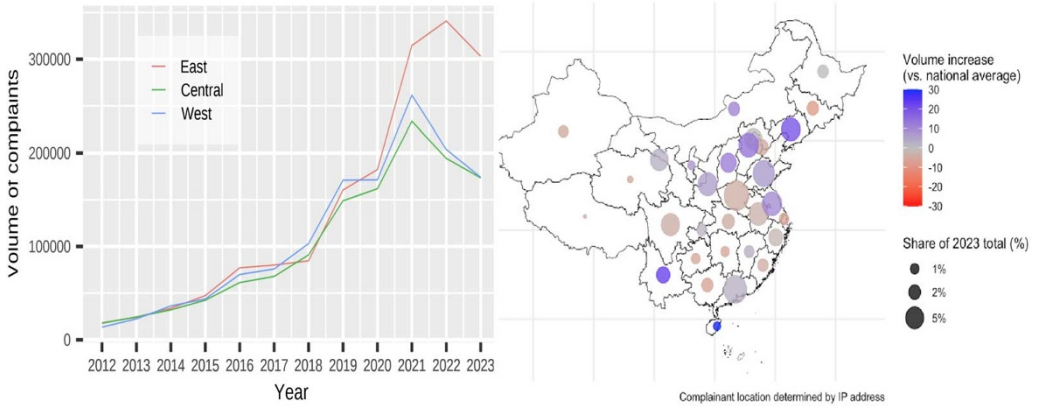

Figure 5. Petition Volume by Region (left) and Petition Growth by Province (right), 2012–2023
Notes: Both are based on IP address. In the right figure, blue (red) dots indicate faster (slower) growth than the national average. Dot size is the share of national petitions in 2023.

Appeal topics grow more diverse

Beyond volume increases, we find that Chinese citizens submitted petitions on an increasingly diverse range of topics to the MBL. Figure 7 presents the percentage of appeal topics by year, based on the structural topic model. Results show that in 2011, rural development issues, such as land disputes and resettlement, dominated the platform, accounting for over 25 per cent of all appeals. Since 2019, however, no single topic has occupied more than 15 per cent of appeals, and rural issues dropped to only 9 per cent of appeals in 2023.

The decline in rural issues accompanies a rise in urban topics and, in particular, real estate petitions. Tables 2 and 3 present the top five appeal topics in 2011 and 2023, respectively. The tables show that the new top topics in 2023 concerned typical urban problems: property development

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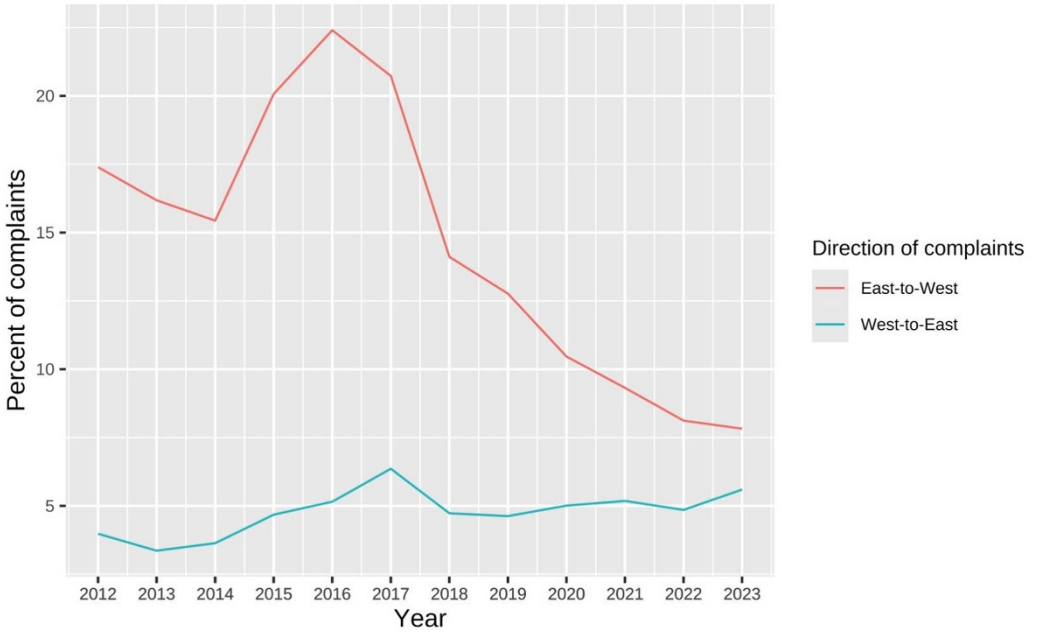

Figure 6. Share of Appeals Sent Between Eastern Provinces and Western/Central Provinces
Notes: Based on IP address. The volume of west-to-east flow (light blue line) is less than half of the volume of east-to-west flow (red line) over 2012–2023.

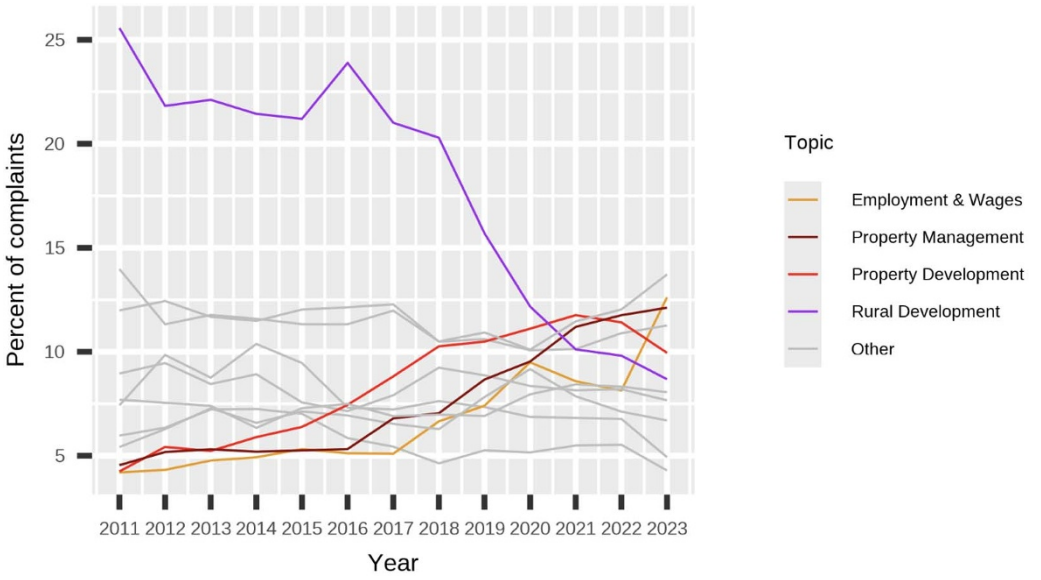

Figure 7. Percentage of Appeals by Topic by Year
Notes: The four topics in colour experienced the largest volume change between 2011 and 2023.

(*maifang jiufen* 买房纠纷), property management (*wuye jiufen* 物业纠纷) and employment and wages (*zhichang he gongzi jiufen* 职场和工资纠纷). The first two issues, related to housing, experienced the fastest growth over the past decade compared to other topics. We also observe these

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trends – rising numbers of urban and real estate appeals – when examining petitioners' self-reported topics (see online Appendix A.1.3).

Table 2. Top Five Topics, 2011

Topic	Percentage
Rural development	25.57
Transportation	13.97
Pollution	11.99
Government corruption	8.95
Utilities	7.70

Table 3. Top Five Topics, 2023

Topic	Percentage
Transportation	13.72
Employment and wages	12.62
Property management	12.12
Pollution	11.27
Property development	9.95

Additionally, from 2011 to 2023, citizens consistently raised some of China's most contentious socio-economic issues on the MBL. Figure 8 presents two examples. The left-hand panel shows the share of petitions in Henan mentioning the word "rain" by year, with summer months shaded. Climate change and poorly designed cities have resulted in destructive flooding occurring in Henan every summer, which manifests on the MBL as annual summer spikes in flood petitions. The right-hand panel shows the share of appeals mentioning "Evergrande" (*hengda* 恒大), a real estate giant whose 2021 default roiled the country, leaving millions of people homeless, jobless and in debt. There was a surge in petitions lodged against Evergrande on the MBL in the early months of 2021 when rumours of its financial problems emerged. In August 2021, when the Central Bank issued an official warning to the firm, Evergrande accounted for almost one in every 50 petitions on the platform.[29] The sharp decline afterwards likely indicates government censorship on the topic. Nevertheless, an ongoing trickle of petitions in 2022 and 2023 shows that even censorship did not deter all citizens from continuing to lodge petitions against the firm. These findings suggest that while citizens petition on the MBL about an increasingly diverse range of issues, these issues are consistently salient problems from everyday life.

Appeal to more diverse and powerful officials

Evidence further suggests that Chinese citizens have become more strategic in choosing whom to petition, both by addressing appeals to more administrative levels and, within each level, increasingly

29 See "Timeline: worsening crisis at Evergrande." *Reuters*, 29 January 2024, https://bit.ly/3EYTXcp.

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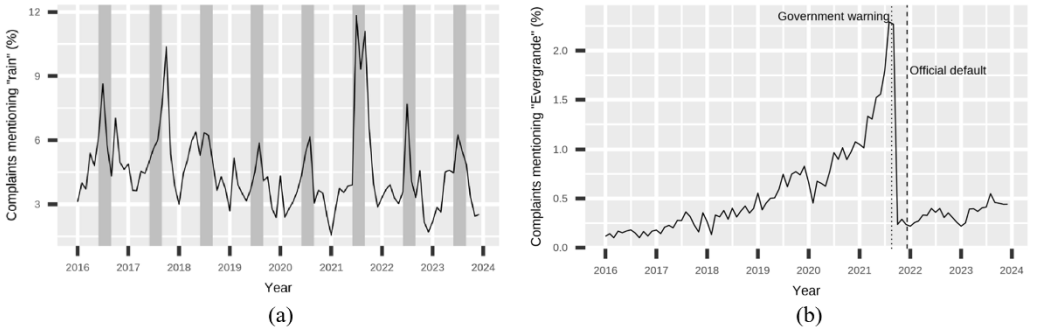

Figure 8. Citizens Use MBL to Seek Redress on Issues Salient to their Well-being. (a) Flooding petitions in Henan by year. (b) Petitions about Evergrande by year

directing their appeals to Party rather than state officials. Figure 9 plots the share of appeals sent to provincial, prefectural and county-level officials by year. In 2011, more than half of the appeals on the MBL were directed to prefecture-level officials. By 2023, however, this percentage had declined to 42 per cent, whereas appeals to county-level officials rose to 35 per cent and appeals to provincial officials increased to 23 per cent, indicating a broader diversification of petition addressees over time.

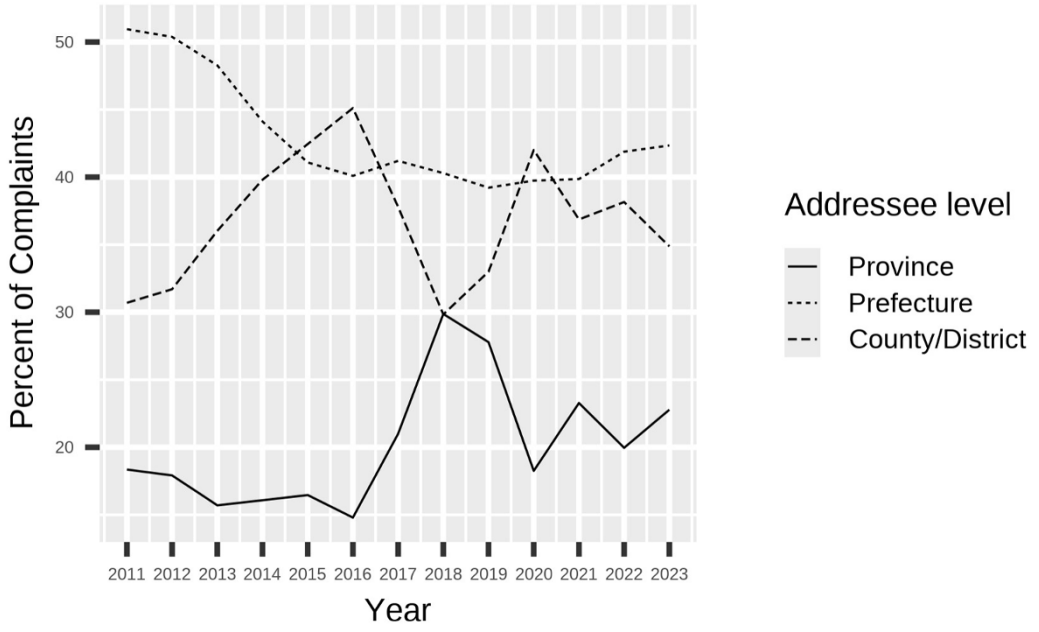

Figure 9. Percentage of Appeals Addressed to Different Government Levels by Year

Citizens have also increasingly appealed to Party secretaries, who hold greater authority than their state counterparts in the PRC's political hierarchy. Figure 10 shows the percentage of citizen appeals submitted to Party secretaries by year. Results show that since Xi Jinping took office, this percentage has grown from 70 per cent to 80 per cent on the MBL, with the increase accelerating after 2018 when Xi amended the country's constitution to remove presidential term limits.

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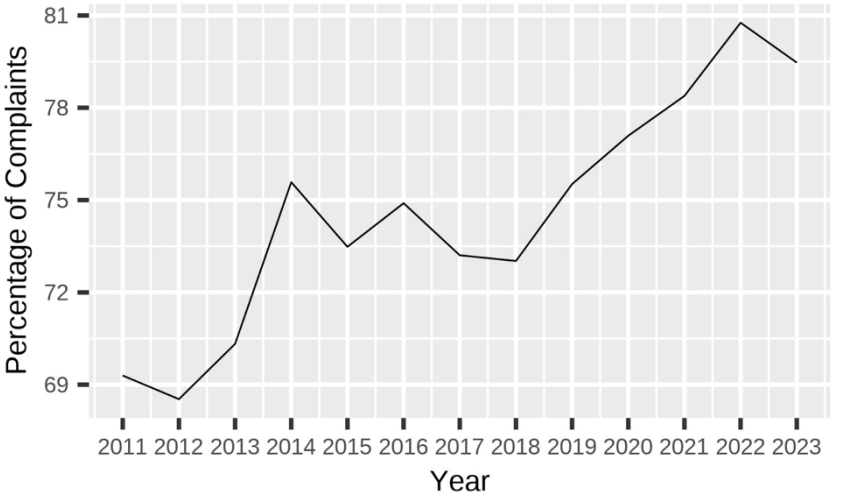

Figure 10. Percent of Appeals Addressed to Party Secretaries by Year

Government responses become faster and more substantive

Finally, our results show that the increased citizen usage of the MBL in petition volume, diversity and strategy was accompanied by improved state responsiveness. Figure 11 presents the response rate and resolution rate (left plot), and average elapsed days before response (right plot) by year. In 2011, 50 per cent of the appeals submitted on the MBL received an official response, while only 17 per cent of appeals received a substantive resolution. These figures increased substantially to 98 per cent and 31 per cent, respectively, in 2023. The response time of officials also improved, from an average of 176 days (6 months) in 2011 to 19 days in 2023. Importantly, the substantive resolution rate nearly doubled (from 17 per cent to 31 per cent) over these 13 years, and resolution rates increased across all types of submissions to the platform, including complaints (*tousu* 投诉), enquiries (*zixun* 咨询) and suggestions (*jianyan* 建言).[30]

One potential concern is that the observed increase in substantive resolution reflects official data fabrication rather than genuine improvements in responsiveness. For example, local governments or the MBL platform could selectively report resolved petitions, misrepresent case outcomes or generate spurious petitions that are subsequently claimed as "resolved." While such possibilities cannot be entirely ruled out, our calculations suggest that fabrication sufficient to account for the observed trend would need to occur at a very large scale and involve sustained, cross-provincial coordination over multiple years. We also observe no abrupt spikes or discontinuities in year-to-year resolution rates that would indicate episodic manipulation. Section A.5.4 of the online Appendix provides detailed calculations and additional evidence addressing this concern.

Government resolution rates improved across all appeal topics between 2011 and 2023, although the magnitude of improvement varies considerably by issue area. Figure 12 presents yearly resolution rates by appeal topic. Over the past decade, appeals concerning civil service exams[31] and rural development were the most likely to receive a substantive resolution; these two topics also experienced the fastest growth in resolution rates. By contrast, real estate-related petitions, including property development and property management, were the least likely to be resolved and witnessed the slowest improvement over time. In 2022, nearly 50 per cent of civil service exam appeals were resolved, compared to only 14 per cent of property development appeals. Results further indicate that

30 See online Appendix A.5.1 for a breakdown by submission type.

31 This appeal topic concerns civil servant jobs' recruitment (*kaogong kaobian*) and welfare.

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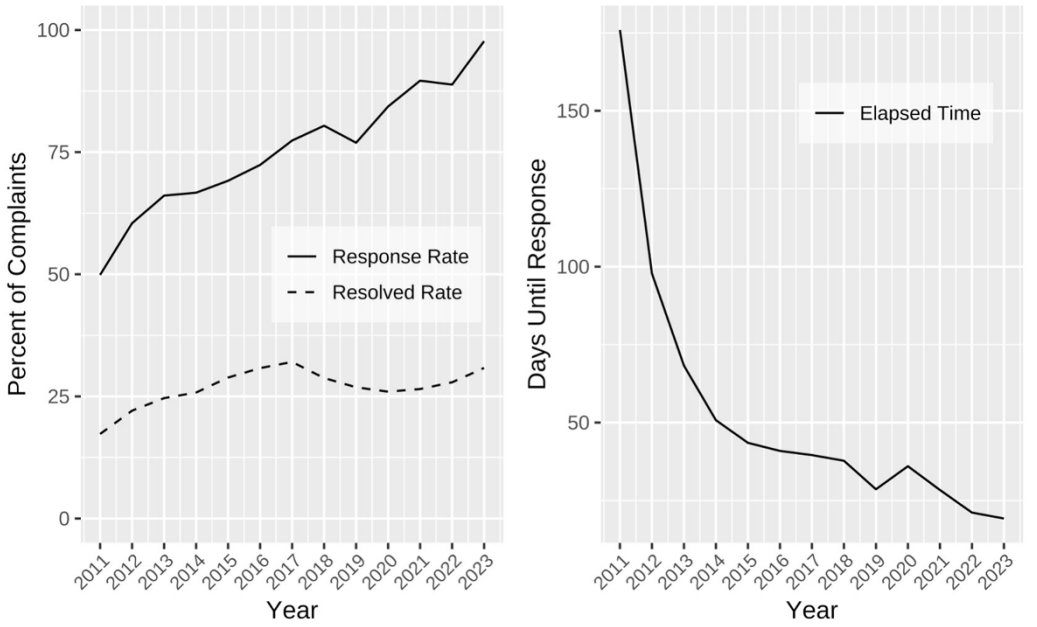

Figure 11. Government Response/Resolution Rates (left panel) and Average Response Time (right panel)

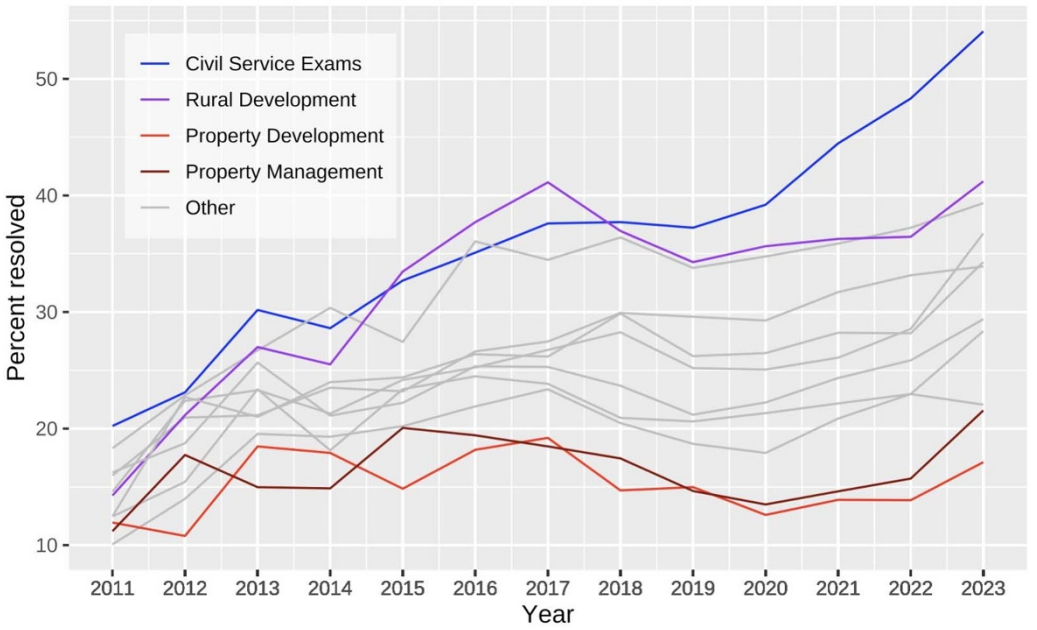

Figure 12. Official Resolution Rates by Appeal Topic
Notes: Over 2011–2023, appeals on civil service exams and rural development had, on average, the highest substantive resolution rate, while property development and property management appeals had the lowest.

property-related petitions faced particularly low chances of substantive redress during crisis periods. In 2021, when Evergrande's debt default unfolded, only 12 per cent of petitions mentioning the

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company received a resolution, which was less than half the resolution rate of all petitions (26.5 per cent) in that year.

Additionally, we examined the likelihood of receiving any government response (regardless of resolution) by topic as well as response speed. Both improved across all issue areas between 2011 and 2023. Unlike the considerable variation in substantive resolution rates, improvements in response rates and speed were relatively uniform across appeal topics (see online Appendix A.5.2).

Government responsiveness also increased across all 31 provinces, both in substantive resolution rates and in response speed. Between 2011 and 2023, eastern provinces experienced the largest increase in resolution rates, from 9.4 per cent to 32 per cent, and shifted from being the least responsive region to the most responsive relative to the rest of the country (see online Appendix A.5.3 for details). Together, these results indicate that between 2011 and 2023, local officials became more effective in addressing citizen grievances through online petition institutions, although improvements were uneven across issue areas.

Conclusion

The Xi Jinping administration's intensified efforts to channel public grievances towards state-run petition institutions have prompted scholars of China to reconsider how citizens express grievances and how officials respond over time.[32] This research report provides evidence that Chinese citizens have expanded their use of online petition institutions and that local governments have become more responsive, including by substantively resolving a larger share of appeals. Between 2011 and 2023, submissions to the country's largest e-petition portal increased twelvefold, while the number of petitioners grew fivefold. New users were disproportionately urban residents in the east, and citizens raised increasingly diverse issues, with the most rapid growth occurring in property-related grievances. Petitioners also became more strategic over time, contacting more government levels and directing more appeals to Party secretaries. Meanwhile, local governments reduced their average response time by 90 per cent and nearly doubled their resolution rate, from 17 per cent to 31 per cent over these 13 years.

These findings reveal substantial increases in both citizen engagement and state responsiveness within China's e-governance institutions, suggesting that such institutions provide fertile ground for future research on state–society relations. We identify three promising directions. First, future work could utilize the MBL dataset to examine what drives regional variation in platform usage, such as the greater adoption in eastern provinces, as shown in our results. We posit three possibilities: regional differences in socio-economic development, residents' political orientations and local government strategy.

Second, future studies could develop more nuanced assessments of response quality (for example, assessing whether the government's resolution is sustainable) and investigate the predictors of helpful replies. These include how user demographics, political attitudes and petition strategies shape the likelihood of obtaining substantive redress. Relatedly, the longitudinal data on the MBL can facilitate research into how government (non)responsiveness shapes petitioners' subsequent participation.[33] When officials resolve a reported issue, does that encourage citizens to raise more sensitive concerns? When officials fail to solve problems, do citizens disengage? Answers to these questions would illuminate the long-term implications of petition institutions.

Finally, future work could assess whether the increased participation and responsiveness observed on the MBL generalize to other petition institutions. China now maintains an extensive ecosystem of online and offline petition channels, managed by different administrative levels and functional departments. Yet systematic evidence on how these institutions interact remains limited. On the

32 Fu and Distelhorst 2018; Göbel and Li 2021; He 2025; Hu, Gong and Zhao 2025; Ong 2023.

33 Existing research offers mixed findings: some suggest that official responses stimulate more petitions (Zheng and Meng 2021), while others argue that petitions drive responses (Distelhorst and Hou 2017).

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one hand, these venues may complement one another, enabling citizens to make claims through multiple channels. On the other hand, they may compete, leading different social groups to select different institutions. Future study could examine how citizens choose from among these channels and whether the platforms they use influence the chance of official resolution. Together, these lines of inquiry would clarify how citizens navigate China's evolving petition system and shed light on the broader mechanisms through which authoritarian regimes manage public grievances.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741026102550 (also at https://tongtongzhang.com).

Acknowledgements. Both authors contributed equally and are listed in alphabetical order. For helpful comments and suggestions, the authors thank participants at APSA 2024 Chinese Politics Mini-Conference and the Virtual Political Science Speaker Series on China. We also thank Ji Feng and Melody Wang for excellent research assistance. The School of Public Affairs at American University, Stanford Data Science (SDS), Stanford Center on China's Economy and Institutions (SCCEI) and Stanford Institute for Human-Centered AI (HAI) provided funding and research support.

Competing interests. None.

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Cite this article: Matt DeButts and Tongtong Zhang. 2026. "Rising engagement and substantive responsiveness: 13 years of online petitioning in China." *The China Quarterly*, 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741026102550

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