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**Sustaining State Legitimacy in the Era of Digital Transformation:**

**The case of China**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Speaking of digital transformation studies, most of the contemporary mainstream scholars are focusing on western democratic countries as well as the technical aspects of the digital transformation itself. However, the west mainstream academic world has long neglected the innovating capacities reside within the resilient authoritarian regimes, as occurred previously and repeatedly in the near past. This thesis aimed at understanding the reason and motives behind the Chinese state self-initiated digital transformation from the theory of state legitimacy perspective. Though the originality of the state legitimacy theory resides in Max Weber. Nevertheless, the theory is in developing process ever since. This thesis adopted one of the latest modification from Dingxin Zhao, Sociology Docent at University of Chicago. He boldly analysed the ‘flaws’ in Weber and follow-up scholars’ induction and proposed three ideal-type set of state legitimacy: ideology legitimacy, performance legitimacy and procedural legitimacy. Especially, performance legitimacy and his re-discovery of the mandate of Heaven have been well and wide recognized in the academic circle of Chinese Studies. Base on the Zhao’s modifications of state legitimacy theory, the thesis will elaborate each legitimacy type in depth and will supplement it with China’s practice, and to some extent with additional scholar’s framework, such as Daniel Bell’s Political Meritocracy, Sebastian Heilmann’s Digital Leninism and Nick Couldry’s Cyber Colonialism.

Keywords: Max Weber, Dingxin Zhao, State Legitimacy Theory, China, Digital Transformation

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the past 40 years, many events, topics and issues raised and are still impacting the present. Scholars all over the world are tackling the issues they think are the most challenging for the mankind's future. For some, it's the energy crisis and environmental issue; for some, it's the war on terror and the post-war ongoing terrorist movements; or for the other some, it's the never-repentant gamblers' sting high on top of the Wall Street tricks world into financial schemes over and over again.

All aforementioned issues have shaped and are still shaping the contemporary world, but the most impactful event emerged from pass 40 years is from the country that decreased its absolute poverty population from 90 percent to 1 percent, that became the biggest manufacturer, trader, economy entity (GDP by PPP) in the last decade and possess the largest middle class on earth (Allison, 2017). Yes, the event is the rise of China, and the main issue along with the phenomenon, is the regime in most possible comprehension, still an authoritarian regime.

The case study of China has provided the best example of resilience authoritarian regime in the era of ICT. 'In the aftermath of Chairman Mao Zedong's disastrous personality cult, Chinese paramount leader Deng Xiaoping recognized the dangers of totalitarian dictatorship. In the early 1980s Deng set about establishing a system that relied on competent governance, co-opting the elite and consensus rule at the top. China was still an autocracy, but it incorporated and empowered enough interest groups to provide basic political stability and stellar economic growth (Anderlini, 2018)'. In the recent years the party elites have been studying the failure of socialism in the Soviet Union, concluding that the primary reason was the fact the planned economy did not succeed because inadequate and inaccurate information reached the central government (Funabashi, 2018). After realizing artificial intelligence and big data can help the Chinese central government obtain all types of information on individual citizens, not just data on an unspecific majority or focus group, the techno upstarts as the new interest group have been absorbed by the party (Funabashi, 2018).

Techno companies like Alibaba, Tencent, JD and so on, while they provide all sorts of services that make Chinese lives easier, at the mean time possess all the records of their users, varies from salaries, shopping lists, travel destinations to menu for dinner. With the latest trend, as Chinese state requested 1 percent share of all above mentioned oligopolies, this regulation has transformed the government from supervisor to stakeholder itself (Zhong & Wee, 2017). This practice provided a glance of the Chinese resilient authoritarian regime's digital transformation. Big data and artificial intelligence evolved in China so quickly attributed to the large population data sample, makes China a great 'digital colonial power' as Nick Couldry (2019) pointed out.

However, despite the facts, in recent years, China has been repeatedly seen as a digitally converted power. There has been very limited study both within and outside China. Within China, noticeably, as China is still an authoritarian regime, few and limited sources in original Chinese language can be found and traced, as the topic tackled the Chinese state governance directly, academics in China may strained by the state censorship (SAR, 2019). Outside of China, academics are either self-strict to look at China as a regime that rely solely on oppression and coercion, its democratic transforming is still pending and way overdue, they see the digitalization as a way for stalling that process, or strategically, with narrow focus on the technological aspects of the Chinese digital transformation (Pilling, 2015).

Considering the lacking of study in the area of resilient authoritarian regime and growing popularity of the digitally transforming study, this thesis tend to fill the gap that has been left behind by the academics of both spheres. This thesis attempts to provide a glance of resilient authoritarian regime's digital transformation from the perspective of state legitimacy, it aims to reveal the mechanism as well as the structure behind the ongoing Chinese digital transformation, why and how Chinese government an authoritarian regime self-initiated the digital transformation?

This thesis opts state legitimacy angle for two reasons: firstly, no question is more fundamental to a political regime's stability and survival than that of popular legitimacy (Perry, 2018). Secondly, the Chinese Communist Party high officials are also taking the angle of state legitimacy. For instance Wang Qishan, vice president, chief architect and executor of President Xi Jinping, stressed on the Chinese Communist Party's legitimacy, "The Legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party has its source in history, and rests on the will and choice of the people (Li, 2017)."

This thesis tend to take the State Legitimacy theory to outline the mechanism behind authoritarian regimes digitally transformation, a systematical view within the framework of the state legitimacy theory reflected. Empirically, it will then be supplemented with firsthand experience originated from my personal interaction with the government via a social media platform.

In the following text, the thesis will introduce the concept of the State Legitimacy theory and its modifications and adaptations, especially in the context of Chinese politics. Followed by one of the latest development by the University of Chicago scholar Dingxin Zhao, his development of the State Legitimacy ideal type sets categorization, ideological, performance and procedural legitimacy, as well as how current Chinese government is address each legitimacy aspect accordingly. Last but not the least, with my limited experience interacting with Chinese governments on the social media platform WeChat, all above points, especially the development and progress Chinese government made in the digital direction will be reflected and revealing the mechanism behind the Chinese government self-initiated digital transformation as a whole.

## **1. The Permanent Legitimacy Problem**

First of all, to understand legitimacy in Chinese context, the general definition of legitimacy must be clarified, ‘Legitimacy, originated from Latin, *legitimare*, meaning ‘to declare lawful’, broadly means ‘rightfulness.’ Legitimacy therefore confers on an order or command an authoritative or binding character thus transforming power into authority...legitimacy as a moral or rational principle; that is as the grounds on which governments may demand obedience from citizens (Heywood 2013, p. 81).’

Further, to understand the reason and cause behind China and to be more precise, Chinese Communist Party’s digital transformation is the pre-requisite of understanding modern resilient authoritarian regimes. The renowned sinologist Elizabeth Perry provide the angle of legitimacy which was originated from Max Weber’s ‘The Three Types of Legitimate Rule’ to look into this issue.

Her understanding of the legitimacy is crucial since both the issue and the approach are universal. As the state legitimacy is a permanent problem that inclusively troubles all governments, and in particular authoritarian regimes stress even more on this aspect. China as a typical authoritarian regime, is no exception.

Perry (2018, p.11) initially address that ‘No question is more fundamental to a political regime’s stability and survival than that of popular legitimacy...only the most coercive of police states can endure for long without a general acceptance of regime legitimacy on the part of the populace.’

She then quoted Max Weber identified three basic sources of regime legitimacy: traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal to further support and provide frame for her analysis.

First of all, Perry (2018, p.11) concluded that, ‘in the traditional type, people obey the state’s dictates simply because it is customary to do so which exemplified by the imperial China the period that lasted for two thousand years long. While revolutionary China ruled under Mao is a classic



case of charismatic rule, ‘since the supreme leader of a Communist Revolution that restored Chinese sovereignty, Mao Zedong’s personal aura shone brighter than that of any of his contemporaries or successors.’ The view Mao was ruling on Charismatic legitimacy is widely acknowledged among the Chinese study scholars (Zheng & Guo, 2009).

Furthermore, Perry (2018, p.12) address the third legitimacy in the case of China, ‘In the rational-legal type of legitimacy, which sustains modern democracies, impersonal laws and bureaucratic administrative procedures are the basis for citizens’ compliance. Few observers, however, would suggest that any point in China’s long history of authoritarianism has rational-legal legitimacy prevailed; today, as in the past, rule of man consistently trumps rule of law.’ Nevertheless, party scholars on different occasions through academic publishing urged the party to transit to the rational-legal legitimacy to enrich the general stability, the last two party leadership’s initiative of ‘rule by law’ is the attempt of addressing and enhance rational-legal legitimacy (Yuan, 2013).

Moreover, Perry (2018, p.12) noticed that ‘to be sure, there have been efforts in the post-Mao period to generate rational-legal legitimacy through various institutional reforms: convening regular party and government congress, clarifying respective party and government responsibilities, constructing a collective leadership with separate portfolios for members of the Politburo Standing Committee, imposing mandatory retirement ages and terms limits on party and government officials, and so on. But the movement toward institutionalization.’

At this stage Perry noticed the major change in Chinese political history since the opening and reforming till this point. This is worth noting as it justified the turnover of the governance direction, set the course of from where to where, ‘the movement toward institutionalization appears to have reversed course in recent years. Under Xi Jinping, power has been recentralized in the paramount leader, the Party’s unquestioned supremacy over government has been reasserted, and norms surrounding age and term limits have been challenged in preparation for the 19th Party Congress (Perry, 2018).’

Perry (2018, p.12) in her article tended to find the answer of this reverse as well as the explanation, she then added ‘if none of Weber’s three classic types of legitimacy applies to contemporary China, how then do explain the paradox that-more than forty years after Mao’s death and nearly thirty years after the fall of communism across central Europe-a communist regime remains firmly in

place in Beijing?’ This is significant because this is largely related to the understanding of the resilience variation in authoritarianism.

Eventually, Perry (2018) justified the phenomenon with the new concept which was outside of Weber’s box, historical legitimacy, derived from Party Document and official speech, though she remain dubious to it after rejecting the other justifications, ‘performance legitimacy’ and ‘popular legitimacy’ that popularized among Chinese academics.

Nevertheless, before Perry reach her conclusion. Two other concepts were introduced. And in my opinion, those concepts in fact reveal the justification for this reverse. Moreover, the extension build on original Weber’s theory has made the legitimacy model type with enhanced dynamic and vital. And it is documented in Perry (2018, p.13)’s article ‘Struggling to explain the paradox of regime sustainability in contemporary China, several scholars, including Dingxin Zhao and Yuchao Zhu, have suggested that the PRC survives only by virtue of an instrumental “performance legitimacy” derived from the impressive economic growth of the post-Mao period and China’s attendant ascended in international influence.’ Though Perry noticed the scholars with Chinese originalities provided different comprehension on the issue. Still, Perry’s attention limited to only the narrative of performance legitimacy.

As a fact, Dingxin Zhao for instance, as this thesis will focus on, not only developed Weber’s legitimacy theory, to some extent it has revolutionized it with the nutrients received from the Chinese contexts. For analyzing the mechanism behind the digital transformation of contemporary China, Zhao’s legitimacy theory provided the perspective that cover the issue to nearly a full extent.

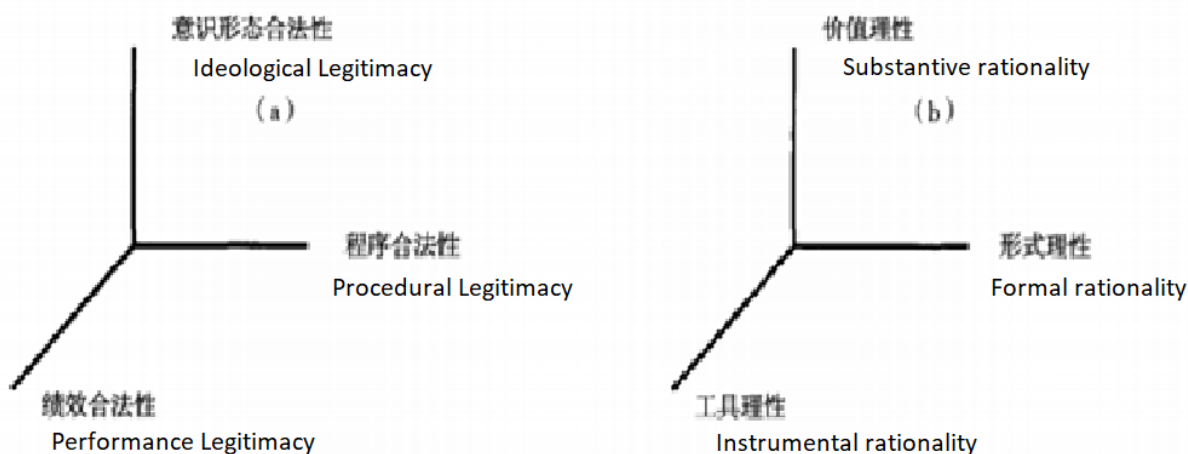
Especially, considering the circumstances that the current government is facing, as Minxin Pei puts (2019) ‘the trade war took a toll on the Chinese economy, Hong Kong revolted and the world stepped up scrutiny of Xinjiang’. Still, Xi as well as the party’s grip on power are secure. Xi’s one man rule and centralization of power did not halt, as the rising living standards sustains the legitimacy of one-party rule, those changes were actually underpinned by the rise of the Chinese technological industry even before Xi ascended to power, and this same event underpinned the ongoing digital transformation as this thesis will elaborate in the later sections.

## 2. Limitations of Weber’s Ideal-types of Legitimacy

Zhao revealed his three types of legitimate rule by firstly pointing out the ‘flaws’ in Max Weber’s theory. Firstly, Zhao highlighted the main flaw of Weber’s theory, the categorize system of legitimacy’s ideal types. Zhao (2016, p. 169) commented that an ideal type categorize system must have two characteristics: orthogonality, each dimension formed by one ideal type concept does not intersect with another; Completeness, while combining the ideal-type set all possibilities of the phenomenon should be included. Zhao furthermore has compared the sociological perspective of the ideal type with the psychological perspective that Weber contributed early on, in the formation of n-dimensional Euclidean Space:

Three orthogonal dimintions of the state legitimacy orginality and its' corresponding psychological foundation

图 1 国家合法性来源理想型集的三个正交维度 (a) 及它们所对应的三个正交的心理基础 (b)



As seen above, Zhao (2016) is comparing state legitimacy type with rationalities Weber coined to explain human reasoning, Zhao linked ideology legitimacy to substantive rationality, performance legitimacy to instrumental rationality and procedure legitimacy to formal rationality, as those three rationalities sets the psychological foundations of the state legitimacy type sets.

Further, Zhao criticizes that Weber’s system does not match with aforementioned two characteristics, orthogonality and completeness. Weber’s categorize system lacking people’s belief and submission to broad ideology. Zhao (2016) supplemented that secular and religious ideologies

can both be the origin of state legitimacy, he took examples of Islam provided the legitimacy for the state of Iran while the Chinese Communist Party's state legitimacy during the People's Republic of China (PRC) early time can be traced back to Chairman Mao's personal Charisma. And this form the main flaw of Weber's original theory from Zhao (2016), once adding ideology legitimacy into Weber's legitimacy category, it is hard to neglect the redundancy of traditional legitimacy and charismatic legitimacy. Zhao added that the core of ideology legitimacy is the submission to certain value or belief while tradition and personal charisma, precisely speaking, is a sort of value and belief, and it falls right into ideology legitimacy. Naturally, Weber's theory is constrained by time, and Zhao's development is built on the evolution of ideological politics.

From this point, Zhao (2016) noticed the main 'flaw' of Weber's original theory, once adding ideology legitimacy into Weber's legitimacy category, it is hard to neglect the redundancy of traditional legitimacy and charismatic legitimacy. Zhao added that the core of ideology legitimacy is the submission to certain value or belief while tradition and personal charisma, precisely speaking, is a sort of value and belief, and it falls right into ideology legitimacy.

Zhao (2016) then take on the rational-legal legitimacy, as it neglects established recognition of the political procedures outside of the legislations and administrative principles. Zhao then stated that unwritten operative rules existing in both democratic elections and authoritarian succession system.

Last but not the least, Weber's categorization excluded on essentiality, as any state must provide some basic public goods to the people. The importance of this concluded well by Woo, Ramesh and Howlett (2015, p. 1), "state must provide public goods in the dimensions of political, social, economic and security...While government may be endowed with different levels of legitimate capacity when they first attain office, they may overtime work on building up capacity by focusing on the spheres in which they may be lacking. Conversely, they may lose legitimacy if their efforts in these areas are counter-productive."

Perry (2018, p.13) raised a question, 'Will dwindling political support under conditions of adversity spell the downfall of the regime, as proponent of a "performance legitimacy" explanation predict, or does the Chinese communist regime command a level of popular legitimacy that may allow it to withstand the substantial domestic and global challenges looming on the horizon?' Though Perry raised the question without considering the influence of ICT. Nevertheless, as

Chinese government is undergoing speedy transformation integrated with high involvement of ICT sectors. Therefore, understanding Zhao's state legitimacy theory is the key of comprehending and analyzing Chinese resilient authoritarian governance and its self-initiated digital transformation as well as the mechanism behind that tied the two together.

### **3. Dingxin Zhao's Three Types of Legitimate Rule**

In the system of Zhao (2016), state can form its legitimacy from the following three aspects: an ideology that can be commonly accepted; capability to provide public goods society-wide and an acceptable leadership selection procedure for certain group which is capable to influence political process to seize matching social status.

If the state's legitimacy originated in a commonly accepted ideology, then the state's governance can be classified as ideology legitimacy. If the legitimacy of the state comes from the government's capability of providing government goods, then it can be classified as performance legitimacy. If the legitimacy of the state rooted in the procedures that accepted by interest groups capable of influence political process, then it can be classified as procedure legitimacy (Zhao, 2016).

Though those three legitimacies are orthogonal to each other, none regime will or can build its legitimacy solely on a single type of the legitimacy. In fact, most of the regime's legitimacy is a mixture of all those three ideal types. However, in particular period of time, a regime can rely heavily on one ideal type of legitimacy as the source of the state governance, and it significantly define the state's nature, political cognition and behaviors (Zhao, 2016).

Zhao smartly commented that, in reality, the three ideal types of legitimacy can be connected and he dodged the criticism of being over focused on performance legitimacy and neglecting ideological legitimacy (Holbig & Gilley, 2010). For instance, the pre-requisite of the wide acceptance of leadership selection procedure is mostly likely because the procedure has been acknowledged as beneficial and positive as well as, if one regime recognized by the people as it provided sufficient public goods to the public, it can be either a fact which supports the performance legitimacy or as part of the state propaganda which is associated with the ideology legitimacy. Nevertheless, as ideal types they are different in its essence or as aforementioned, orthogonal (Zhao, 2016).

Again, those three ideal types are not only orthogonal but also completing. As Zhao (2016) mentioned, any other sort of legitimacy is in fact, a combination or variation of those three ideal types.

### **3.1 Ideology Legitimacy**

Zhao's ideal type of ideology legitimacy derived from Weber's substantive rationality. Zhao (2016) commented that, both instrumental rationality and form rationality, behind it there is a clearly calculation method or formula that is not deeply connected with emotion. However, the foundation of substantive rationality is the recognition and admiring of certain ideology. Comparing with instrumental rationality and formal rationality, substantive rationality can better shape and stimulate the public emotion. Therefore, nearly all country relentlessly putting effort into constructing mainstream ideology, though it requires personnel, organizational and resource support. Moreover, constructing a successful mainstream ideology needs to match the four following political principles: firstly, the core value of the ideology must be a leading doctrine; secondly, the core value needs to be self-consistent; secondly, the core-value cannot be proved as falsified; last but not the least, the core-value must be matching with humanity (Zhao, 2016).

It then comes to the question, what is the core-value that provide ideology legitimacy for the current Chinese regime. At the surface level, as a known communist state, naturally, it seemed to be Communism. Daniel Bell, however, provided a different perspective. Bell (2015) pointed out, currently, even it depleted Marxism, the official ideology of any communist party completely, and the Chinese Communist Party is still able to build its ideology legitimacy solely upon the core-value of nationalism.

Bell (2015) noticed, despite the fact nationalism entered Chinese political sphere merely 100 years, it did match with the political psychology of the Chinese mass. Till mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese intellectuals had always staged China as the center of the world. From the ordinary Chinese narrative, the self-center pride is totally destructed by the invasion of the western powers and Japanese imperialism. Ever since, China suffered continuous military failures, endless civil wars and poverty. Till this point, Chinese political elites and intellectuals realized and admitted China's

periphery existence in the ever expanding post-Westphalian international political order. And ever since that dedicated themselves for advocating China's self-empowerment. The movement lasted from the first opium war in 1840 and till 1949 Chairman Mao marked the end of the humiliation by the establishment of People's Republic of China which abolished all previous unequal treaties.

Knowing development path of the nationalism as the core-value for Chinese ideology legitimacy helps understanding the current place of Chinese nationalism and how will it facilitate the digital transformation the current regime is tackling on.

### **3.2 Performance Legitimacy**

The origin of performance legitimacy theory in the Chinese context can be traced back to nearly three thousand years ago, the dynasties' transition between Shang and Zhou as well as the invention of the concept mandate of heaven.

BC 11<sup>th</sup> century, Zhou dynasty took advantage of Shang dynasty internal disputes and conflicts and replaced it successfully. However, as other ancient civilization, the early era Shang dynasty build superstition tradition during its reign, leadership of Zhou has make a rhetoric claim that the rule of Shang dynasty displeased heaven above and therefore as it was heaven's mandate that Zhou destined to replace Shang (Zhao, 2015). Since then till AD 1911, the establishment of Republic of China, the mandate of heaven was in active for around three thousand years (Zhao, 2015).

Dingxin Zhao (2015) analyze and summarize the essence of the mandate of heaven, 'though the ruler cannot decide his own destiny, but he can influence the heaven's will by well governance of the state. If heaven is displeased with the rulers' governance, it will send warning in the formations of drought, flood, earthquake, plague and so on. And the ruler shall take those signs as the guidance send from above. Those signs not only worked as reminder for the ruling class, but also played important roles as motivation and encouragement for the uprising movement that often led to dynasty shift.'

This tradition has had been developed in full details through the ancient China as Thomas Metzger (1977) summarized, as the emperor could be killed for under-performance, so the civil servants were always be critiqued and under the risk of dismissal and punishment, even down to capital



punishment not only for crimes-in-office, but for under-performance. ‘The MoH approach, then, is an effective way to link public-service activity with genuine performance, i.e. what of the overall quality of life of the government unit in question, not any detailed obligation or meeting performance goals. There are no micro-level performance indicators that ultimately matter, even if they might be formally included in deliberation and decision-making processes; the judgement of the civil servant’s superiors, colleagues and indeed of the people does. If he fails and be it due to a natural disaster, he has to go. And as we see for instance very clearly in Wang Anshi, successful performance for PA means economic performance, with material well-being as a condition sine qua non for human happiness (Drechsler & Karo 2017, p. 20).’

Zhao (2018, p. 56) cleverly noticed the return of performance legitimacy in contemporary China: ‘With Mao’s era ended, the leadership under General Secretary Deng realized that the Chinese economy was on the brink of collapse and the majority of the population live under poverty line. He made the decision of implementing opening and reforming policy.’ So that as result, the rapid economic growth and material lives improvements could take place. Since the 3<sup>rd</sup> Plenary Session of the 11<sup>th</sup> Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in 1978 till current time, except the years effect by 1989 turmoil, Chinese economy has remained above 5 percent GDP growth for 30 years (NBSC, 2013). The booming economy supported the one party rule legitimacy even through the harshest moment of the political turmoil in 1989 protests.

The current administration leadership has clearly see the political stability rely on the economic development. Therefore, they deliberately refining the performance legitimacy based on the economic merits. At the policy end, previous two administrations have focused on expanding market economy reform, take actions to put high inflation and stagnation in control as well as establishing mechanism to prevent and punish corruption, this effort became well perceived and crystal clear under Xi’s era (Ang, 2018).

### **3.3 Procedural Legitimacy**

Zhao (2016)’s concept of procedural legitimacy, in its full extent is commonly accepted procedure of leadership selection. This legitimacy is based on the formal rationality, as it shapes the political cognition and behavior of the people. The focus of this legitimacy is not any political essentialities

but rather the procedures itself. It justify itself as, if the selection process is legitimate then the selected ruler's governance is legitimate (Zhao, 2016).

This comprehension of procedural legitimacy provides well explanation that justifies the western democracy's legitimacy source. For instance, it is capable to explain that why the candidates in democratic elections are lean to make empty promises that they cannot fulfil or deliver. As procedural legitimacy is built on the selection procedures instead of personal skills, experiences and capabilities (Zhao, 2016).

Comparing with the other two ideal type of legitimacies, the procedural legitimacy in its nature is more stabilized. In the process of selection, taking another example of election, diversified interests groups will counterweigh each other and in fact create limited pressure on the state administration, as well as, the ruling time length is defined by term which was originated in the procedure (Zhao, 2016). The procedural legitimacy is not well connected with any leadership capabilities, know-hows or achievements.

As Zhao (2016) commented in the performance legitimacy, as well as Bell (2015) noticed, it is not the case in China. However, a country without common democratic selection does mean the state cannot build its state legitimacy on procedures.

Bell (2015) noted, since ancient times, under Confucianism, Chinese officials were judged by their moralities and behaviors. Preliminarily, through the national exam on classical Confucius scripts understandings. This requirement were universally applied, even the highest ruler, emperors made no exemption. The ancient China as well as current Chinese regime, was following the leadership selection procedure as Bell (2015, p.76) coined Political Meritocracy, 'in imperial China, there was no distinction between civil servants and political leaders: the successful examination candidate were put on the path to be political leaders with the power to decide on matters affecting millions people's lives. In contemporary China, the public service examination still is the stepping-stones to political power; there are no separated tracks for political official and civil.' Bell (2015) analyzed that, political meritocracy is not only capable of selecting skillful experienced leadership, but also leadership selected in this method is not short sighted and with sense of broad scope. Though neither Bell nor Zhao pointed this political meritocracy to the direct of procedural legitimacy. Still, in its essence, it does match with the definition, a commonly accepted procedure of leadership selection.

### 3.4 Legitimacy in China

This section focused on elaborating in extent the essence of Zhao's state legitimacy theory. After pointing out the limitation in Weber's theory, un-orthogonal and in-completing, Zhao proposed his ideal-type sets of legitimacy: ideological, performance and procedural legitimacy. Zhao's background is sociology, and legitimacy study falls perfectly in political sociology, proposed theory has quite strong sociological and psychological foundations, as well as his specialty in entomology granted him competent geometry constructive capability, as can be seen in the previous section - the n-dimensional Euclidean space Zhao constructed to elaborate his ideal-type -sets.

Though, like many other developments of state legitimacy theory, Zhao's theory is derived from Weber's as well. However, many public administration scholars with interests in China are familiar with the performance legitimacy ideal type of Zhao's sets. Still it is necessary to introduce the other two ideal types that carry equal importance in this thesis context: ideological and procedural legitimacy. In my opinion, only with holistic understanding of Zhao's state legitimacy theory, one can understand Chinese government self-initiated digital transformation as a whole and in full extent.

Firstly, this section discussed the current regime source of ideology legitimacy. It has deployed the argument that despite the state and the ruling party name, the ideology of communism, or even socialism, has been marginalized in Chinese political lives. After CCP succeeded as the ruling party, it in fact picked the political legacy formed after the first Opium War - nationalism. CCP, therefore, burdened with this legacy and formed its grand narrative of foreign humiliation imposed on China, and portrays itself as the savior of the Chinese people. In the next section, the 'explosive' characteristic of nationalism will be elaborated in the Chinese context, as well as how the Chinese government intends to 'reshape' and put the nationalism under 'control' by using technology method.

Secondly, performance legitimacy and the MoH are Zhao's most renowned academic achievements. Though, ancient Chinese research is neither strictly prohibited nor censored, however, few scholars both in China and overseas made the thorough study of the Mandate of

Heaven, especially modernize the concept to performance legitimacy. Performance legitimacy has rooted in China for nearly 3000 years and the current regime has successfully captured the essence and regain its legitimacy in this dimension. This success brought the nation and the party back from the brink of collapse in 1978, since the 3<sup>rd</sup> Plenary Session of the 11<sup>th</sup> Central Committee of the Communist Party of China. Zhao (2018, p.273) has previously criticized that the current regime became over-addictive to performance legitimacy and unwilling to shift to more stable legitimacy source, such as procedural legitimacy. In the following section, the thesis will discuss the reason why Zhao labels performance legitimacy as instable as well as explore in depth the nature of digital transformation and how it boosted the Chinese government's confidence to keep relying on performance legitimacy.

Lastly, this section derailed from Zhao's original concept of procedural legitimacy which was heavily derived from western democracy election system. I have constructed my own analysis combining Zhao's theory with Bell. Zhao (2016) denied that the current Chinese regime possesses any sort of procedural legitimacy. However, I disagree with Zhao, since the essence of procedural legitimacy exists beyond the process of democratic election, but rather the procedure of finding and fitting the right people into right political and social positions, as Bell described political meritocracy, using the ancient state official exam to illustrate. I will deploy my analysis fully in the following section of why do I think procedural legitimacy in China carries same much of the state legitimacy weight as performance legitimacy.

## **4. From Legitimacy to China's Self-initiated Digital Transformation**

This section aimed at elaborating the contemporary issues and emerging challenges conforming to above listed state legitimacy perspectives that the current Chinese regime is facing. Followed by, as divided in each section, how current Chinese regime addresses and copes those rising challenges with digital technologies.

Fundamentally, it is necessary to have a general understanding of digital transformation before moving to detailed Chinese context. Jin Chen, provided definition of digital transformation with clarity. He divided the transformation in three layers, firstly, digitization, the process of changing from analog to digital form; followed by, secondly, digitalization, the use of digital technologies to change a business model and provide new revenue and value-producing opportunities (Gartner n.d., cited in Chen, 2019). Combining the previous layers, digital transformation as a governmental strategy is, the process of exploiting digital technologies and supporting capabilities to create a robust new digital ruling model as the following section will reveal.

### **4.1 Ideology Legitimacy Perspective**

Since the establishment of People's Republic of China, the nationalism has evolved thorough time and political events along with the regime itself. Through events, such as Korean War, unrest in the peripheries, the separation with Soviet Union and so on, according to Daniel Bell (2015), those serial events cultivated the nationalism in China based on the victim psychology and hatred of foreign powers. Chinese communist party in particular, is extra sensitive to 'foreign intervention' and has deployed nationwide patriotism education, to relentlessly remind the 'humiliation' that China suffered from foreign powers and the knowledge only Chinese Communist Party can save and protect China from foreign interventions (Bell, 2015). This nationalism stance has been enhanced now and then, causes vary from territorial disputes to protests or putting sanctions over foreign media or regime due to violating One China Policy.

However, both Bell and Zhao have noticed that, though nationalism acted as the core-value of the ideology legitimacy at the early state of the PRC regime. And, despite the fact, Chinese governments do deploy the patriotism education at all school levels. To some degree, the goal that the current regime trying to achieve is more lean toward guiding the social channels of nationalism enthusiasm while certain out of control events erupt (Zhao, 2012). The current issue with the ideology legitimacy is its sustainability when the nationalism emotion is dominated by hatred of foreign powers.

Nevertheless, dissidents of the current regime now often come from state controlled media and influencers. ‘One risk to CCP rule is that people who have been subject to patriotic education turn against the regime for failing to stand up to foreign interference as much as it should. Best-selling books such as *China Can Say No* are not so implicitly critical of the regime of being “soft” in the way it deals with Japan, Taiwan, and the West. Popular newspapers such as the *Global Times* are viewed as “nationalistic” by outsiders, but much of their censorship is directed at excessively belligerent and hawkish expressions of nationalism. Anti-Japanese demonstrations are reined in by the authorities for fear that they can get out of hand. Bellicose nationalism is almost universally rejected by Chinese intellectuals, but it resonates more at the popular level (and in military circles) and may well go beyond what the government intends (Bell 2015, p. 141)’.

Zhao (2003) indirectly commented on Bell’s point, nationalism and authoritarianism are not compatible. Firstly, all citizens’ rights are interconnected and consistent, it is impossible for the public to express nationalistic and patriotic opinions without commenting other parts of the political life. It is also difficult for the government to only allow the petition to organize nationalistic and patriotic protests while rejecting all other assembly petitions over issues that can trace back to the government.

In the context of Zhao (2003), once the citizens can freely express their nationalistic concerns, the civil rights awareness might as well spread to other aspects. Therefore, it will bring direct challenge to the authoritarian rule. Moreover, once the state partially lift the bar, Chinese intellectuals, as well as state media will soon establish patriotism discussion that is different from the government officially recognized statement and serve the cause of the public. Ever since the nationalism evolved from Mao’s era, there has always been two versions of it, the official recognized patriotism and the popular nationalism well accepted by the public.

This is a dilemma, a challenge indeed. The contemporary Chinese regime still possess wide range of supports in terms of ideology legitimacy. At the same time, the public accepted core value from time to time, over different matters, alienated from the regime's official narrative. It is not accurate to state that the current regime has insufficient ideology legitimacy. Still, it is a fact, the current regime is facing severe challenge in this aspect of the state legitimacy.

Chinese government in the recent years has made efforts of replacing the core-value of the ideology legitimacy. Bell (2015) provided an example, Thatcher's government did win the war with Argentina, but her cabinet did not stay in power. It proves from one point, ideology legitimacy build on nationalism and military victory cannot last. During the peaceful time, it is more obvious for the public to notice the different interest between the nation and the party. To place nationalism under its control, Chinese government has tended to soften the nationalism by replacing foreign hatred and military glory with cultural and historical national pride (Bell, 2015). Jyrki Kallio (2016) observed that, 'China's leaders utilize history and tradition in their rhetoric to emphasize the uniquely Chinese nature of their politics, and to rationalize their opposition to universal values and perceived West-centrism of the international system.' The current regime has spent nearly ten years on stressing harmony, a core-value originated in Confucianism, since Chairman Hu's administration, though Chairman Xi has made many changes since he came to power. Nevertheless, he has kept some consistent with Hu in this aspect.

In one word, the core-value of the ideology legitimacy in China, has changed multiple times in the past 200 years, from Confucianism to nationalism and currently with government's subtle attempt of going back to Confucianism. According to Zhao (2015), state core value in its essence is a grand narrative, the Mandate of Heaven is a grand narrative that form the core value for the feudal and imperial period of China; or as Chiang Kai-shek state "during the past hundred years, the citizens of the entire country, suffering under the yoke of unequal treaties which gave foreigner special 'concessions' and extra-territorial status in China, were unanimous that the national humiliation be avenged and the state be made strong .', nationalism is also a grand narrative during the Modern period; contemporary Chinese hardly resonate with the narrative from their historical textbook, the historical materialism view of 'only Chinese Communist Party can save China' (Bell 2015, p.140). Zhao's observation and discovery revealed the fact that, in the current China, society-wide speaking, there is no commonly acknowledged or accepted core-value.

So when the ICT industry start to integrate in every Chinese daily life, unavoidably, it creates a large open space for any possible discussion (Zhao, 2012). This went far beyond the regime's control, as previously mentioned, as the government could merely censor all criticism of the state controlled media unless it takes the technological high ground which enable it to guide all the discussion channel exist online and censor its contest and reacts accordingly; furthermore, to reach a society-wide consensus in a country the size of China, censorship is only a method of coercion, the government aimed at engagement using the state of art ICT technology to vast regions and people of China (Lin & Zhao, 2008).

Since the fourth meeting of the Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reform in 2014, the party has prioritizing its development and transformation of the propaganda works, it innovates the state media to migrate to internet platform (Li, 2018). In the same year, 2014, the presence of state media channel increased in the social platform Weibo, with this experience when mobile platform emerged, State Medias opened their public account on WeChat almost instantly.

A good example, is provided by the joint effort of Chinese government with WeChat, a multi-function app developed by previously mentioned techno conglomerate, Tencent. All Chinese major cities' public services have migrate to WeChat platform, the services varies from construction noise compliant to driving license application. In some extreme case, for instance, Zhejiang Province, has proposed the slogan 'Maximum come once', meaning e-service should be so convenient that the residents only needs to go to government agencies' office once at the worst scenario, it's the oriental equivalent e-government concept and deployment as EU's once-only principles (Zhe, 2018). Those channels not only trying to provide government e-services, it served as new media that provides personal tailored service of information, from animated video convers content that discussed in National People's Congress to Celebrities promoting China dreams. All those efforts aimed at reshaping core-value and public engagements to strength the state ideology legitimacy.

## **4.2 Performance Legitimacy Perspective**

'Flying Geese' is a well-established paradigm, the shifting pattern of Asian manufacturing supply chains, which has underpinned the Asian economics miracles. 'In this paradigm, Asian economies have caught up with the West in a regionally sequential pattern, with the manufacturing of labour-



intensive commodities gradually shifting from the more advanced economies to the less developed ones as the costs increase for the forerunners, or “lead geese.” ...this “flying geese” paradigm has successfully reproduced itself in Asian economies during the past decades, with labour-intensive manufacturing supply chains sequentially shifting from Japan to the “Four Asian Tigers” (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan) to the Chinese mainland (Chen, 2019).”

However, China be a major benefactor in the North East Asia of the flying geese effect is coming to an end, due to the US-China ongoing trade disputes along with China’s rising costs and its increasing orientation toward domestic economy, has turned the spotlight to Southeast Asia (Pananond, 2019) At the same time, the world trading system that China has been benefited since its joining in 2001 is undergoing fundamental changes.

At the other end of Performance Legitimacy as Zhao (2009) empathized, China with its resurrected Confucian-MoH agenda, as latently unstable because it may lead to crisis once the state ceased to perform well.

To counterweight it, current Chinese state administration initiated The Belt and Road Initiative intended to solve the long accumulated overproduction problem and to create constant incentives on Chinese economy. In fact, The Belt and Road Initiative, aimed at consuming China’s overproduction capacity by exporting to countries along the ancient Silk Road, so that the Chinese economy can well transform and climb higher at the production value chain, is one of the main contents in Xi’s official party ideology China Dream.

Digital Silk Road, part of the Belt and Road Initiatives, previously known as ‘Information Silk Road’ as introduced jointly by Chinese National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce, it sets agenda included strengthening internet infrastructure, deepening space cooperation, developing common technology standards, and improving the efficiency of policing systems among the Belt and Road countries (Chan, 2019). However, the implementation of The Belt and Road initiative has been restricted by the limited knowledge and information Chinese officials has on the planned deploying regions. This is where the digital transformation need to take place as well.

Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejia (2018) in their joint article: Data colonialism rethinking big data’s relation to the contemporary subject made deep comparison of the data relations, as they defined

‘new types of human relations which enable the extraction of data for commodification, social life all over the globe becomes an ‘open’ resources for extraction that is somehow “just there” for capital. These global flows of data are as expansive as historic colonialism’s appropriation of land, resources, and bodies although the epicenter has somewhat shifted. Data colonialism involves not one pole of colonial power (‘the West’) but at least two: the USA and China (Couldry & Mejias, 2018).

Data colonialism at one hand will boost the Chinese economy as aforementioned to justify the performance legitimacy issue, the aforementioned two authors commented ‘the centuries-long global cycle of colonialism’s long intertwining with capitalism (Couldry & Mejias, 2018). Just as industrial capitalism would not have happened without the prior appropriation under historical colonialism of cast territories, their ‘natural’ resources and bodies, so we are today witnessing the first stage of another long-term double development: the colonial appropriation of life in general and its annexation to capital, through various mechanism of which one is the digital platform. The platform...produces the social for capital...a form of ‘social’ that is ready for appropriation and exploitation for value as data, when combined with other data similarly appropriated.’ As ‘personal data will be the new ‘oil’ (Couldry & Mejias, 2018).’

In addition, they also commented that ‘corporations as the only ones with the power and capacity to process data...Firms like Amazon, Apple, Facebook, and Google in the West, and Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent in China, are its most well-known players (Couldry & Mejias, 2018).’ The idea of Digital Colonialism provided the vision in the bipolar world of US-China data domination, Chinese Techno Conglomerate, known as the new party absorbed elite not only contributing data and technology to Chinese ever expanding mercantilism state economy as well as provide the direct competition with the ‘West’ as the most effective frontline soldier fighting the war of preventing ‘peaceful transformation.’ Their participation will lead the Chinese digital transformation not only helping China climbing the value chain, but also based on their big data advantage providing information for the other main context of Xi’s Chinese dream, deepening social reform, especially eliminating poverty and enhancing social welfare distribution.

Perry (2018, p. 17) acknowledges that ‘a more ambitious approach could draw support from the MoH, whereby a ruler’s popular legitimacy was based on a comprehensive concern for social welfare.’

As Zhao (2009) identified that the major issue of state legitimacy largely build on performance is that, unlike ancient states, only limited public goods needed to be provided to society. The ruler's main goal is governance stability instead of economic development. Therefore, merit legitimacy is easier to maintain in the ancient China. In the contemporary China, the state must provide diversified public goods at higher and higher standards to satisfy the Chinese public's demands. Historically, there is no single state that has maintained the Chinese economic growth speed for the same amount of time. As recently seen, though the absolute economic growth is still increase, the economic percentage has slowed by compare to the previous decades. Even though, China is working on closing the income gap and eliminating poverty as well as increasing welfare and benefits, as the state legitimacy heavily rely on this, soon the merits distribution cannot meet the people's expectation.

However, Zhao's analysis is flawed in today context, as he did not consider the capacity of big data and artificial intelligence and to what degree Chinese regime is capable of adopting it. Though the intrinsic dilemma of performance legitimacy cannot be eliminated. Still, the resource can be efficiently deployed to close both physical gap and data gap, and as result enhanced the state performance legitimacy.

### **4.3 Procedural Legitimacy Perspective**

Both Zhao and Bells' analysis have self-strict to one aspect of the procedural legitimacy. Though I agree with Zhao's point of procedure legitimacy in the general sense. Nevertheless, Zhao's concept of procedure legitimacy is only covered a specific part of the area, leadership selection procedure.

However, Zhao's original narrative on this theory is over-Western democracy focused which lead to a lacking of universality of the theory as well as examined by the current highest Chinese leadership selection process, Zhao's theory of procedural legitimacy is proven falsified.

This strict definition of procedure legitimacy led Zhao to neglect the procedure legitimacy in the broad sense. As the procedure is not the end in itself, but merely means. The aim of the procedures is the engagement of emerged social class to allow social mobility, so that the emerged social class

can acquire their corresponding rights and resources without using violent methods that can lead to social instability and insecurity.

To my observation, the procedure legitimacy does exist in current Chinese regime, it is only not in the formation of Bell and Zhao's comprehension. One of Zhao's article provided the answer, he comprehended in the aspect of performance legitimacy, 'Orthodox Leninism state, the communist party is the pioneer of the worker's class. But during the time of Chairman Jiang, majority of the state owned enterprise have bankrupted, large amount of workers were laid off from the state companies. Worker's class, the class that Chinese Communist party supposed to represent, their social status has apparently declined. In contrast, foreign companies, joint venture companies as well as private owned companies are booming in China. Currently, office's workers at foreign and jointed venture companies along with private business owners, company management and newly emerged office worker in newly emerged private companies composed the new upper and middle class in China. For the ruling party, to absorb those new elites into the political establishment is a serious problem. Facing this challenge, Chinese Communist Party started to permit private business owner to join Chinese Communist Party, and proposed 'three representative' theory. The 'three representative' theory officially proposed by Chairman Jiang in 2001 at the venue of 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of Chinese Communist Party. Chairman Jiang pointed out: Our Party must always represent the requirements for developing China's advanced productive forces, the orientation of China's advanced culture and the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people. From this pragmatic even opportunistic slogan, we can tell the new generation of the party leadership has abandoned the orthodox communist ideology (Zhao 2018, p. 61).'

This observation of social elite and class integration into party or ruling system from Zhao's is extremely crucial to understand the current change in China in terms of procedural legitimacy aspect.

The first indicator that signaled of this ongoing transformation was reported by former chief edition of Asahi Shimbun, Yoichi Funabashi. Funabashi (2018) quoted an unrevealed influential Hong Kong businessman, 'China has studied the reasons for the failure of socialism in the Soviet Union. The primary reason was the fact that the planned economy did not succeed because inadequate and inaccurate information reached the central government. Today, however, artificial intelligence and big data have given the central government the ability to obtain all types of

information on individual citizens, not just data on an unspecified majority or focus groups. I suspect confidence is growing that China will not end up like the Soviet Union...The Chinese people are not so resistant to the social credit system. The system is convenient, and after all is said and done people feel first-hand that their quality of life is improving with every year.'

Funabashi's quote is not groundless and worth to pay attention to. I have web searched the event of 'the study of the collapse of the Soviet Union'. Most of the result appear in year 2013 when the Chinese leadership transitioned. Moreover, the search result reflected that nearly all government institutions and each layer of party organization have organized collective study of one particular documentary, made by Chinese Academy of Social Science, '20 Years' Reflection on Soviet Communist Party's Decline (NIGPAS, 2013). The documentary and associated book stressed on pointing out the critical factor that lead to the collapse of the Soviet Union, is 'wester democratic transformation' and 'capitalist privatization' (Hong, 2014). Based on this, it can be seen as the documentary was commanded to broadcast party-wide, it represented and indicated the new party leadership's ideology on reflection of the Soviet Union's collapse as Funabashi observed

After two years observation of the transition, Heilmann (2016) is the first China observer who noticed revive of Leninism in China, 'Xi has reinforced Leninist-style hierarchies and party discipline, and started a relentless rectification campaign. He also set out to centralize political decision-making and reassert party control over the economy, society, media and security apparatus. Bureaucracies in charge of discipline and surveillance, which had previously kept a lower profile, were mobilized and expanded to curtailed organizational, political and ethical deviations within the party and state apparatus. A vehement anti-corruption campaign was launched that brought fear and feigned compliance back to the center of inner party life. Finally, the state security apparatus, which had been busy pursuing its own business operations, was reorganized to watch more effectively over Chinese and foreign organization inside and outside China.'

Both Funabashi and Heilmann noticed that today's digital society presents a major challenge to the Chinese party state and the ruling circle is well-aware of it. Heilmann (2016) commented that 'Xi is determined to turn this challenge into strength. China's authorities have moved beyond censorship of undesirable content, employing sophisticated instruments to shape the online narrative. Refined algorithms have been set up to steer users towards officially approved websites and away from potentially subversive content. In addition, the propaganda apparatus has created

new online formats to make the party line appealing to a broader audience. Finally, China's government is making advances in providing e-government services to its citizens, suggesting a degree of transparency or accessibility that stands in sharp contrast to the prevailing opacity of political and administrative procedures.' What this really mean is the return of Leninism is not a political or social degeneration but in fact a transformation or evolution enable by technology.

At this point it is necessary to trace the transition back to the extent of the pre-set rational legitimacy cause. This change that moving towards Leninism, at its surface level seemed non-institutional and spontaneous as it was 'dictated' by the highest leader. However, it is in fact inevitable and institutionalized within the party and did not derail the top-level design that has been set 40 years ago under General Secretary Deng. It is a two way process, the party engage the new emerged class as ruling elite, currently, the techno conglomerates and the techno conglomerate provide the know-hows that turned the challenge into strength. This process in general sets the cornerstone for the Chines government self-initiated digital transformation as well as strength the procedural legitimacy, as ICT conglomerates are the new social elite that is integrating into the ruling class of China.

Alibaba founder Jack Ma (who happened to be a member of CCP) has offered a resounding endorsement of China's future, saying: "China's command economy will grow even bigger in the next 30 years (Funabashi, 2018)." The probability is high that China will gain ascendancy in the fields of AI and big data (Funabashi, 2018).

#### **4.4 Unintended Consequence**

In the above section, the thesis address all three ideal-types of Zhao in the context of China with supplemented historical and political facts. Nevertheless, the word 'self-initiated' in the Chinese regime digital transformation context is deliberated.

In the aspect of ideology performance, Chinese nationalism was not originated in CCP, but rather communism is the nominal ideology of the party. China is a state of 56 officially recognized ethnicities, nationalism is rather an instable source or state legitimacy ideology. Still, CCP inherited the nationalism from the former Kuomintang regime, as quoted in aforementioned speech of Chiang Kai-shek. The nationalism approach easily awoke the emotional resonance of Chinese,

hence, qualified as a grand narrative, the core value of the state ideological legitimacy. This was unintended, the CCP's act of nationalism approach was out politically motivated consideration for state legitimacy.

The performance legitimacy, brought CCP back from the brink of collapse in 1978 has its root in the ancient Chinese history, Mandate of Heaven. However, as Zhao described, performance legitimacy is unstable, as the people's desires for improvements on public goods, social welfare and economic growth are limitless. The regime, to secure the performance legitimacy, relentlessly worked on economic growth as well as infrastructure construction and renovation. This obsession of economic growth resulted Chinese manufacturing industry to become the biggest in the world. This complete supply chain enable the mass production of affordable smart phones, for instance Xiaomi, as well as the state obsession with infrastructure building, 4G and now 5G network deployment, commissioned to ZTE and Huawei, bridged 800 million Chinese into the digital network. This happened unintended, they were the results of CCP dedication and addiction to economy growth which aimed at secure performance legitimacy.

Last but not the least, the Chinese government implements internet censorship to protect its own ICT sector in general. Nevertheless, none of Baidu, Alibaba or Tencent is a state owned enterprise. Their successes were selections of the market, as they did face the severe competition within China. The regime integrated them after they had triumphed as the leading companies in the ICT sector.

All in all, none of the above acts were the regime's intended plans, it did not plan to have a market economy; it did not plan to have booming light-industry as well as it did not plan to lead in ICT transformation. In fact, they were a serial of events that the regime endeavored to secure its legitimacy in all three aspects. The Chinese government self-initiated digital transformation is merely a new attempt of securing the legitimacy in the new era of ICT with big data and artificial intelligence.

This section aimed at explaining and proving that the current Chinese regime, regardless actively or passively, is working on all three state legitimacy aspects. Though it might not putting equivalent amount of endeavor in enhancing each ideal type. Nevertheless, the intention of empowering the regime in all aspects of the state legitimacy is absolutely the main motive of the ongoing Chinese government digital transformation. The following section derived from my

personal experience of interacting with the Chinese government on the aforementioned super app WeChat, it will add the empirical flesh to the skeleton of previous theoretical build-ups.



## **5. First-hand Experience: Interacting with Governmental Agencies via WeChat**

Before carrying on with my WeChat user experience to exemplify Chinese state enhance its legitimacy through digital transformation. There are two pre-requisite fact needs to be stated:

Chinese digital transformation was restrained and facilitated by the spread and mass production of smart phones as well as the rapid deployment of 4G network and now replacing with 5G. The mass production capabilities and complete supply chain system within China, enabled its manufactures lowered its price for the mass equipment of the whole Chinese society.

Secondly, banking system played a critical part in this digital transformation as well. The slow paced credit card and POS machine distribution enabled smart phone to replace POS machine, tech conglomerates such as Tencent and Alibaba to replace traditional banks with around 90 percent population and business coverage (Tencent, 2017).

The moderate price and countless life conveniences associated with possessing a smart phone facilitated the 69% of total Chinese mainland population using smart phone (GSMA, 2019).

I would like to use my recent first-hand experience to exemplify this. I have visited the capital of central Chinese province Hubei, Wuhan May 2019 or a short period. I have noticed two unpleasant phenomenon during the short stay, public places like restaurants and shops do not forbid smoking and construction work makes noises through the whole nights.

I made attempts of complaining both of them on a WeChat application, called Wuhan whiteboards hosted jointly by Mayor Hotlines and Yangtze Daily, a local state owned newspaper agency. On this application, users can leave comments and complaints. The user interface looks like the following:

🔍 搜索

## 最新留言 分类浏览

街道上堆积大量垃圾筒

■ 办理中

🕒 2019-06-07 🆔 APP\_373601  
👉 问题反映 其它市容环境管理问题

店门前每天堆20几个垃圾箱，...

■ 办理中

🕒 2019-06-07 🆔 APP\_373601  
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咨询房屋公共部分损坏由谁负...

■ 办理中

🕒 2019-06-07 🆔 APP\_370407  
👉 政策咨询 其它房屋土地管理问题

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■ 办理中

🕒 2019-06-07 🆔 APP\_372986 👉 问题反映 私搭乱建

为桌刀泉工商所李先生点赞

■ 办理中

🕒 2019-06-07 🆔 APP\_372646  
👉 点赞 其它社会服务问题

融创K1项目拖欠农民工工资

■ 办理中

🕒 2019-06-07 🆔 APP\_373662 👉 问题反映 拖欠工资

红刀路17街建筑工地查老期间

■ 办理中



浏览



留言



我的

Though there are no general checks and balances in Chinese authoritarian regime system. This digital transformation, nevertheless, attempted to involve Tech Company and media to facilitate citizens to supervise the local administrations.

My complaint of public smoking caught the eyes of the City Health Commission staff very soon. They continuously called me and informed regarding the progress they had made, such as they went to check the venue I had reported. Further, they explained to me the current progress of their works. They elaborated the city legislation process in Wuhan had fell behind of developed areas of China, currently there is no legislation banning smoking inside. Nevertheless, the city council is intended to make legislation to fully prohibit smoking inside buildings and the legislation will be reviewed by the end of 2019 and will become active starts from April, 2020. The commission staff did not stop at this point, they stated though smoking is not illegal in Wuhan yet due to city legislation, still, it is morally wrong, and they do recommend all smokers stop smoking indoors. They concluded the conversation with reporting that they have increased the amount of signs ‘please don’t smoke here’ in the restaurant I had mentioned and would check nearby restaurants’ signs. The last time the commission called me after seven days, asked me have I notice the sign, has the restaurant smoking situation improved, as well as, if I am satisfied with the answer they provided on the platform, and, in the case I am satisfied with their services please rate them through the application via a page like following:

# 武汉评议

主办单位：市治庸问责办



请在接受服务的现场扫码评价

扫一扫



大武汉，有你有我，越来越好！

武汉格事化信息技术有限公司技术支持

This above case only exemplify the Chinese government e-services from a small aspect. However, considering the context as happened in Wuhan, the deployment of E-services and government has reached relatively high degree.

The issue though is small and might be personal, it provided evidence of how Chinese government self-initiated digital transformation strengthened the state performance legitimacy as the issue is directly related to social welfare. In Guangdong province, the provincial government created the ‘super app’, Guangdong Convenience – YueShengShi, the end user only needs to open the WeChat app and login by scanning their faces, 55 provincial institutions 14000 e-services will be available to carry out within the ‘super app’, the app is active since May 2019, till July already 12 million users registered, reduce the user waiting time from previously 16 working days to 5 (Hu, 2019).

However, my complaint regard the late night construction noise was not quickly and instantly responded. Though through my persistent efforts, I have achieved some replies via the same platform. But the answer was very limited and seems like pre-written perfunctory template. I soon escalated to another platform, ‘Message Board for Local Leader’ owned by ‘People’s Daily’, directly owned by the party, their user interface seen as following:



From there, my complaint made no progress as well. After all, ‘the road construction noise is a project that is associated with Wuhan’s top event 2019, Military Olympic Games’. This is a political merit project which can be consider as major political achievement for local officials and it is direct linked to their future promotion. To some degree, it actually explained why all local channels of complaint resulted nearly no progress. As the problem is rooted in the foundation of the political establishment, as the drilling road is connected with the successfulness of hosting Military Olympic where local official build their political merits for promotion on.

The channel did not result me any satisfy result. Nevertheless, this central media has intended to engage me with daily news promotion that trying to exert my faith in the government and China

Dream, the following an example of promoted news related to government meetings on ‘The Mechanism to Engage People via Internet’:

< 领导留言板

早上8:06



“创新互联网时代群众工作机制”全国研讨会  
在广西贵港举行

人民网评：互联网思维是合格领导干部的标配



广西：网聚民心民智 走好新时代网上群众路线



下午1:33



正在直播：“创新互联网时代群众工作机制”全国研讨会

留言板 | 热门内容 | 广西大会

This new promotion from government agency seems naturally. However, it certified the government’s efforts of using political propaganda consolidating ideology legitimacy through comprehensive media engagement.

Last but not the least, the platform, all aforementioned interactions with governmental agencies were hosted by WeChat, the mobile instant messaging application created by Tencent group. As seen above, the application has overreached more than just an instant messaging application. Like Alibaba mentioned above, Tencent is also one of the technological conglomerates that CCP owns its 1 percent share. The founder of the company, Pony Ma, is one of the 100 personnel praised by the party as the major contributor to the success of Opening and Reforming Policy, during the commemorate ceremony of the policy's 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, along with the founder of Alibaba, Jack Ma and the founder of Baidu, Robin Li (Chang & Cheng, 2018). Their companies are known as BAT, and controlled large network of Chinese technological industry direct or indirectly. The following information from Institute of International Finance's report (Ferenzy, p. 3) briefly demonstrates the impact of the conglomerates impact on Chinese lives, "Alibaba, co-opted "Single's Day," an unofficial holiday that encourages gift-giving to unattached friend and family. In 2017, total sales on Single's Day reached \$25.3 billion...In 2014, Tencent launched "red envelope" – a mobile application that mimics the centuries-old Chinese tradition of giving monetary gifts on holidays and special occasions – on WeChat, the conglomerate's mobile messaging platform. The feature took off and by the end of 2017, approximately 800 million users had connected their bank accounts to WeChat.

Data wise, according to Goldman Sachs report, the average active users of the mobile app for Taobao, Alibaba's consumer-to consumer e-commerce store, opens the app 7.2 times per day and spends 20 minutes on the platform; this allows Alibaba to collect 500 million plus real demographic information and differentiate users with 8000+ purchase intentions and location-based attributes (Mubayi et al., 2017). As for Tencent, WeChat, this aforementioned mobile messaging app which now has over one billion active users. It has developed into the country's principal channel for personal, business, and institutional communication, the platform is accessed more than 10 times daily by 60 percent of user and more than 50 times per day by 21 percent of users. The app facilitates the exchange of approximately 38 billion daily messages (Liao, 2018).

The following table demonstrates the ecosystem of Alibaba and Tencent:



Alibaba	Category	Tencent
	B2B E-COMMERCE Similar To: 	
	BIG DATA MARKETING Similar To: 	
	BIKE SHARING Similar To: 	
	CLOUD SERVICE Similar To: 	
	EDUCATION PLATFORM Similar To: 	
	FINANCIAL MEDIA Similar To: <b>WSJ</b>	
	FINANCIAL SERVICES Similar To: 	
	FOOD DELIVERY Similar To: 	
	GROCERY CHAIN Similar To: 	
	HOME APPLIANCE MANUFACTURER Similar To: 	
	HOME APPLIANCE SHOPPING PLATFORM Similar To: 	
	INSURANCE Similar To: 	
	LIFE SERVICE INFORMATION Similar To: 	

(Ferenzy 2018, p. 4)



Bear in mind, the above image only showing a third of the business sectors those two groups covered. This subtle information provided the latest proof of how social elites been absorbed by the party and grand the party state legitimacy in terms of procedures.

The last image is take from the public account registrant page at Tencent official page, the account can be set default for government use:



(Tencent, n.d.)

This case, though it did not provide in-depth social experiment that address the whole state legitimacy question in full details. Nevertheless, it provides a glance that how the state affect the behavioral mode of an ICT company and in return the ICT enterprise secure its business sector by cooperating with the government and evolve into a global ICT conglomerate.

Further, WeChat with no denial is merely a social application. Yet, this application as previously elaborated, is a special Super App co-nurtured by Chinese government and the ICT conglomerate. So far, the success of this Super App is only possible in the special condition of Chinese ICT environment with all the restrictions, protections and subsidies from Chinese government.

Nevertheless, as the empirical case revealed, WeChat, the super app, addresses and touches every single aspect of state legitimacy with nearly all coverage of Chinese population. My experience maybe limited, still, it is the concretization of the Chinese government self-initiated digital transformation. Through this limited experience, the latest development of the Chinese digital transformation's profile emerged.

There are two major foreseeable challenges on the path of Chinese governmental digital transformation. The first critic is from the co-writer of Nick Couldry, Ulises Mejias (2013, p. 9) in his sole book, 'Off the Network: Disrupting the Digital World', he created the concept of Nodocentrism, 'network technologies play an important role in shaping our societies, and let us suggest, therefore, that whereas before the network as merely a metaphor to describe society, now it has become a technological model or template for organizing it...What I want to suggest is that what we are seeing is not only the pervasive application of the network as a model or template for organizing society but also the emergence of the network as an episteme, a system for organizing knowledge about the world...The shift from metaphor to model to episteme signals a transition from using the network to describe society to using the network to manage or arrange society, defining the parameter for interaction within the network by prescribing, or obstructing, certain kinds of social relations between nodes.'

This shift aforementioned especially at whole society scale has been witnessed in contemporary China. Mejia (2013, p.31) carried on to concrete his concept, 'The most consequential effect of superimposing this technological template and episteme onto social structures is the rendering illegible of everything that is not a node. I call this effect Nodocentrism.'

He then calls attention to the obvious down side of Nodocentrism, 'Nodocentrism does not provide an incorrect picture of the world' this is extremely vital as the correct information is actually passing through the network, for instance, the reliability of Chinese ruling elite will rely more and more on the network and the technologies associated with (Mejia, 2013). Therefore, the fact of that the picture they looking at and rely on is 'an incomplete one' is ignored.

I agree with Mejia (2013, p.33) view on Nodocentrism, just because documents, sites, or objects that have been indexed by the network does not necessarily make what has not been listed simply not exists in the universe, for example, human beings.

Applying to the model of China. The issues mainly has two aspects. One aspect, economically speaking, based on the size of the country, it is, in fact, still very difficult to cover the whole nation into one integrated network when the central government is doing next five year plan. Regions and organizations that somehow has been neglected would stay out of the map or ‘Universe’ for five years. This formed the potential economic problems. On the aspect, political speaking, if the oppositions or opponents formed outside the network detection and cannot handled in time, it possible will lead to direct political turmoil.

Secondly, political turmoil most likely will weaken the state legitimacy. The digitally transformed authoritarian government might arise further challenge on political system and state governance.

Heilmann (2016) recognized this phenomenon, ‘The leadership has also incorporated big data into its national security strategy. In a context where anything that might endanger the CCP’s hold on power is considered a threat to national security, China is establishing a “Social Credit System” to monitor and rate all of its citizens’ economic communicative, and social activities. This is arguably the most ambitious Orwellian scheme in human history, seeking to establish an all-seeing state. And this comprehensive approach to security spreads wider: no business operating in China today can escape the dragnet that is built into current cybersecurity regulations. China’s cyberspace is purposefully designed to be an essential component of the overall political control structure... This big data-enabled, IT backed authoritarianism has the potential to put China on a path toward an entirely new, potentially totalitarian future; while also providing precedents and tools to other authoritarian regimes. This not just warmed-over traditional authoritarianism; it is a new digital Leninism.’

Based on Heilmann’s views, an operating, inward facing governance security model is build which work as a possible answer for Elisabeth Perry’s legitimacy enforcement question, Digital Leninism is a fine answer from the perspective of coercion.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis aimed to identify the mechanism behind the current ongoing digital transformation of the Chinese regime. The thesis took the perspective of legitimacy approach, originated from Max Weber's three ideal type sets. In addition to Weber's theory, the thesis largely absorb the thinking that was done by two renown scholars, Dingxin Zhao and Daniel Bell, both developed Weber's theory and concluded the same two ideal type set, Ideology legitimacy and Performance legitimacy. However, Zhao and Bell has slight different view on the last ideal type, as Zhao's view is Procedural Legitimacy and Bell is Political Meritocracy.

I agree with both scholars on the first two ideal types, Ideology legitimacy and Performance legitimacy. However, I attempt to combine both procedural legitimacy and political meritocracy, as though this legitimacy is originated in formal rationality, but procedure or the way of selecting officers or the highest leadership has no end in itself. I developed the case of 'three representative' that Zhao inputted, as the theory reflects the flow of new social class engagement dynamics. To connect all the legitimacy ideal type together, as they are all orthogonal, for a government to implement decisions or policy like digital transformation, per decision or policy shall benefit the regime in all ideal type aspects. The case of digital transformation plays the role of connecting all ideal types together.

Further research is need to determine the relationship between the digital transformation and how it will affect each legitimacy's ideal type. Though I provided a rather narrowed case study on the social media platform WeChat through my limited interaction on it with governmental agencies. The intend was aimed at showing how Techno Conglomerate has been integrated into the establishment and therefore naturally function to enhance state legitimacy in all aspects of the three types.

Though the governmental is working towards using more information technology to enhance its legitimacy, the over-relying on ICT sector might also need to waken legitimacy as Nick Couldry

and Ulises Mejias pointed. Nevertheless, Regardless the successfulness of Chinese governmental digital transformation, ‘China, for example, adopts a development model that combines relentless market-based economic development and an authoritarian political structure. Digital technology is thus seen as a double-edge sword, supporting information flow for economic growth, fostering consumerism and improving quality of life on the one hand, and facilitating information sharing and collective action that threatens the authority on the other (Zheng et al., 2017).’

My study shows that the current Chinese regime is undergoing self-initiated digital transformation to enhance its overall state legitimacy. Still both theory and case study has its own limits, at the same time the Chinese model and its newly build state ICT system is going through fast expansion many other parts of the world regardless the political system. Therefore, more theoretical study on the resilient authoritarianism as well as field study on the Chinese state ICT system is needed.

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