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1. Introduction

1.1. Topic and Research Question

In China, there exists a so-called online complaint system which enables every citizen with internet access to submit suggestions, recommendations, and complaints regarding various topics on platforms of different administrative levels which are responded to by government agencies. What sets the Chinese complaint system apart from other countries' systems is the fact that the citizen-government communication in the form of submissions and responses are publicly visible in many cases. Even though the degree of publicity varies, in 2019 more than 12 million complaints could be reviewed publicly online (Göbel and Li 2020: 2). Thus, these Chinese online platforms offer a unique opportunity to study the social phenomenon of government-citizen interactions in an authoritarian country like China. This master thesis aims to shed more light on the yet unanswered question of how an authoritarian regime like China responds to citizen appeals and what components and characteristics these responses include. By doing so, the qualitative aspects and nature of online enacted government responsiveness in China can be discovered to gain valuable insights into the staged and selected interaction between the government and its citizens, which is viewed as a *Public Transcript*, in an authoritarian country and find out how the government reacts to citizen appeals and presents itself online.

Distelhorst and Fu (2019) have described the observable communication process in China as a *Public Transcript*¹ which allows an observation of strategic communication performed by the involved actors. It should be noted that they have focused on citizenship types which become apparent within the submissions made by citizens, the responses have not been subject of analysis in their work. Within this master thesis, the communication between citizens and the government in China being enabled through these channels will also be regarded as a *Public Transcript* in the sense of “[...] everyday interaction between ordinary people and political authorities [...]” (Distelhorst and Fu 2019: 106), but the focus will be laid upon the government side of the communication process. By seeing the Chinese government responses as a *Public Transcript*, what becomes observable is not so much a depiction of reality, but more an act of self-staging which gets apparent through the public channels of communication between citizens and the government. Thus, by responding online to citizen appeals, the way the government responds also conveys a certain staged image towards the citizens. For the case of China, the

¹ *Public Transcripts* will be discussed more in chapter two

citizen-government interaction is observable on the online complaint platforms which emerged as a policy innovation process. The platforms successively spread across the whole country and are now a part of a larger system with goals, tasks and guidelines which define how they should be run, what they should provide and what the scope of responsibility and duties of the government and the citizens is (Göbel and Li 2020). Thus, when looking at government responses as a *Public Transcript*, a side aspect that is considered are the underlying expectations and aims for how the government agency is wanted to present itself online by the central government.

Based on this topic and the angle of looking at the contents on the communication on online platforms as *Public Transcripts*, the research interest in how the communication between the Chinese government and the citizens submitting their concerns appears online, what kind of responses citizens receive to their concerns, what image the government conveys by responding to the citizens, and how aligned this image is with the outlined government guidelines. After extensively researching the state of the art regarding already existing analyses², a major research gap has been identified. There have been a few studies which focused on government responses in China, but they were often crudely put into categories like “helpful” and “not helpful” (Distelhorst and Hou 2017) or they focused mainly on the resolution of the submission within the responses (Cai and Zhou 2019). So far, to the best knowledge of the author, there are no in-depth qualitative case studies in the field of government responsiveness with a focus on patterns and components of government responses which feature a comprehensive and detailed analysis of how the government responds to citizen appeals. Thus, the underlying research question for this master thesis has been formulated:

How does the Chinese government respond to online submitted citizen appeals which address different concerns such as complaints, suggestions, and requests and what image does the government convey through the responses to citizen appeals?

As a starting point to tackle this research question, selected state-of-the-art studies which included an analysis of government responses served as the baseline and theoretical background to give the analysis of government responses a clear scope and focus. This leads to the first sub-question to give the research a scope and expectation of what could be found in government responses explore already existing approaches:

Which categories and components of government responses in already existing studies can be identified?

² The state of the art will be discussed further and in more detail within chapter 1.2

To answer the main research question, this master thesis takes in a second step an in-depth look at reoccurring patterns and distinct parts which are semantically connected, of Chinese government responses to online submitted appeals. Thus, the second sub-question has been formulated in order to enrich the current state-of-the art literature with more detailed findings:

Based on these identified categories and components, which semantically connected reoccurring patterns, which will be referred to as subcategories, can be found inductively within Chinese government responses to citizen appeals?

As a result of the conducted analysis, it is attempted to provide a comprehensive framework and thus an analysis tool that identifies differentiated and nuanced categories, which are largely deductively derived, and subcategories, which are inductively derived from the material. The framework will help to better understand government responses in the sense of *Public Transcripts*; which means that what image the government conveys through the responses to citizen appeals, and what the characteristics of this purposeful communication on the government's side are, can be better understood.

These findings can be contextualized with the state-of-the-art literature in order to highlight the contribution of this thesis and relate the generated framework to the state of the art of the corresponding research field. This leads to the third sub-question:

How can government responsiveness in the sense of the identified categories and subcategories of government responses be assessed and discussed in relation to already existing findings in the state-of-the-art literature?

Furthermore, the findings can be discussed in relation to guidelines by the central government for this strategic communication which is viewed as a *Public Transcript*. The government guidelines are viewed as a vision for what the government wants to provide to the citizens and which aspects of government responsiveness and which methods of handling citizen appeals should be prioritized and applied. Thus, the requirements can also be regarded as a “promise” made to the public about how their appeals should be handled. In this sense, this master thesis is additionally aiming to assess how and if the identified categories and subcategories reflect these “promises” by the central government. This leads to the last sub-question:

How can government responsiveness in the sense of the identified categories and subcategories of government responses be assessed and discussed in relation to its alignment with outlined government standards and requirements which address what these platforms and their responses should provide to the citizens?

As an additional aspect, in the empirical part of this thesis examples have been provided which include explanations for terminologies or expressions that have a special meaning that demands background information in order to fully understand what is expressed, such as occurring references of party principles, societal phenomena or ideological terms.

The database from which the data was taken consists of all available responses from the system's inception until present which could be collected by the research project "The Microfoundations of Authoritarian Responsiveness" by Prof. Christian Göbel (Göbel 2015). Through conducting a qualitative content analysis of a random sample of 100 government responses to citizen appeals from this data, the above outlined research question and its sub questions will be answered within this master thesis. By assessing and studying selected central government documents with relevance for the online complaint platforms which cover the time frame from 2000-2016 and by closely assessing already existing findings from the state of the art, an integration of the generated findings will be possible.

It needs to be pointed out that this thesis has the aim to provide an analytical contribution to the research field of government responsiveness and the nature of government responses in China. The focus of this master thesis is laid upon the analysis of government responses and their components and characteristics. Thus, the scope does not include the analysis of correlations between certain topics addressed within citizen appeals and the responses given. It is not dismissed that the topic of the submission can have an impact on what kind of response a citizen appeal receives, but this question is left for future studies which can potentially build on the generated findings of this master thesis.

1.2. Relevance and Contribution

The findings of the author's analysis in the form of an analytical framework have been founded and derived directly from the data. The framework shall serve as a tool to understand the qualitative peculiarities of government responses and their patterns and components in the sense of how the government presents itself online, to whom it acts responsively, and what overall image is aimed to be conveyed by the government. Additionally, through assessing the observable communication between the government and its citizens, more understanding about their portrayed roles can be gained. These insights are highly relevant since how the government portrays itself can have an impact on its perception by the citizens who receive the response. Aspects like regime legitimacy and support and trust in and for the government could be impacted

by the way the government responds and are of great importance for the system's stability. Thus, it matters how the online complaint platforms as a communication tool between the government and its citizens are run and what the contents and components of government responses are.

By contextualizing the empirical findings with the officially claimed standards and requirements of the online complaint platform by the government; the fulfillment of theoretical promises, claims of what should be provided when the government is contacted, and responsibility scopes, can be assessed and discussed. Thus, drawing on the findings and assessing them with the central government guidelines, insights can be gained into how the requirements by the central government are reflected and integrated in the government responses. This is relevant because it can contribute to an understanding about whether the responding government agencies are aligned with the central government. Furthermore, the relationship and dynamics between the central and local government levels can be discussed.

Moreover, the discovered patterns and components of government responses will be illustrated with examples in order to show the manifestation of the categories and subcategories. This provides the opportunity of adding sinological value to the analysis by explaining relevant aspects which can be found in government responses that require further background information to be fully understandable. Furthermore, these explanations embed the categories and subcategories in the Chinese context and can help to give them a deeper meaning.

Lastly, this master thesis will provide a starting point in the form of the generated analytical framework for further research which could contain larger datasets, the employment of quantitative approaches and automatized text categorization. This could lead to statistically representative and significant results. The qualitative approach was chosen because the initial responses analyzed indicated a complexity which would be difficult to overcome with a big data analysis and applying unsupervised machine learning with sufficient accuracy. In the context of the research project "The Microfoundations of Authoritarian Responsiveness" by Prof. Christian Göbel (Göbel 2015) it has been attempted to apply unsupervised machine learning in order to analyze government responses, which has proven to be not successful due to the fact that the responses often reflected and repeated the topics raised in the submission. As the contents of responses are diverse and used in different contexts, it has been found that approaches such as topic modelling are rather limited in their usefulness. Instead, it is proposed that by building on qualitative findings such as generated by this master thesis, supervised or semi-supervised machine learning can be applied to generate meaningful results when analyzing a larger dataset.

1.3. Outline

In order to answer the proposed research question, this master thesis will have the following outline. Within chapter two, firstly the broad and secondly the narrow state of the art will be outlined. The narrow state of the art serves as the theoretical background and baseline for the development of the analytical-theoretical focus which are the identified categories that could be derived from the approaches of analyzing government responses which were employed by the relevant papers. By outlining the relevant aspects from the narrow state of the art, the part which discusses the broad and narrow state of the art serves as the baseline for integrating the findings of this master thesis into the findings of the state of the art. In the last subchapter of chapter two, the theoretical concept of *Public Transcripts* will be introduced in more detail in order to further elucidate its meaning which is relevant as it serves as the underlying theoretical lens through which the government responses and the government-citizen communication is viewed in this master thesis.

Within chapter three, more information about the Chinese online complaint system will be provided. In a first step, the role and development of petitions gets introduced briefly. The second part of chapter three introduces the online complaint platforms by differentiating them from the petition system, assessing their origin and development and lastly summing up the currently existing types of online complaint platforms in order to contextualize the source of the analyzed data. This is necessary in order to understand the setting the responses which were subject of analysis came about. Lastly, the selected central government documents will be introduced with a focus on relevant contents which address guidelines and requirements with implications for how the government should respond to citizen appeals. This part will serve as the baseline for gaining insights into how in line the ways the government responds to citizen are with the government guidelines.

Within chapter four of this master thesis, the methodological approach chosen to conduct the analysis will be introduced. Firstly, the selection of the applied methodological approach will be discussed, followed by a brief introduction of the *Grounded Theory* approach and an outline of the applied method of summarizing qualitative content analysis after Mayring (2010). Lastly, the analyzed dataset and its characteristics will be introduced.

Chapter five is dedicated to the empirical findings of the conducted content analysis. Firstly, the research process will be discussed briefly. Afterwards, the created coding guide will be introduced and each category with its corresponding subcategories will be defined, explained,

exemplified, and interpreted. After introducing the different categories and subcategories, the findings will be summarized and discussed qualitatively and quantitatively.

Chapter six discusses the generated findings in the light of the outlined research sub-questions in order to answer them. Firstly, they will be discussed in the context of the identified government guidelines and requirements for government responses in the sense of how well they meet the formulated expectations and propositions. Secondly, with a focus on contribution and relation to already existing findings, they will be integrated into the state-of-the-art literature. Furthermore, the findings will be outlined and discussed in a more comprehensive way by proposing an analytical framework for the assessment of government responses in China. Moreover, a subchapter of this part is dedicated to interpreting the findings on a larger scale by discussing their implications for government responsiveness in China. Limitations will be discussed lastly. The findings will be comprehensively summed up within chapter seven.

2. State of the Art and Theory

2.1. State of the Art

The state of the art for this master thesis is one of the most important aspects when it comes to narrowing down the analytical scope of the conducted qualitative content analysis. It has served as a baseline and orientation in order to gain focus when analyzing the material. In the first part of this chapter, the broad state of the art will be introduced by firstly giving an overview of the bigger context of the chosen research topic. Afterwards, the narrow state of the art will be introduced in a more detailed way in order to identify the categories which have already been found in existing research.

2.1.1. Broad State of the Art

Within this subchapter, the broader state of the art which is largely related to the research field of government responsiveness shall be outlined briefly and exemplarily. Different studies have been conducted in this field. For example, for democracies like Denmark and the United Kingdom, it has been assessed how responsive governments are towards their citizens by Hobolt and Klemmensen (2005) who found that governments act in a responsive way because of the threat of electoral sanction. Cleary (2007) analyzed how democracy leads to government responsiveness by testing electoral and participatory theories for the case of Mexico and found that participation fosters the quality of municipal government. Sometimes, factors like race and ethnical background were used as crucial for predicting government responsiveness, which was confirmed by Butler and Broockman (2011), who conducted an experiment with state legislators in 44 U.S. states (Butler and Broockman 2011: 467). Grohs et al. (2015) on the other hand did only find limited discrimination effects through their experiment conducted in Germany. Chen et al. (2003) assessed the Taipei City Government's complaint system in order to formulate democracy substantiating suggestions about how to improve the existing system, but also other government's citizen complaint systems. They argue that the process of democratization occurs together with increased government responsiveness (Chen et al. 2003: 542), which logically links government responsiveness, citizen participation and democracy together.

These papers have focused on government responsiveness in democracies. Nevertheless, also authoritarian systems have become the subject of analysis with regards to government responsiveness. This is because it has been found that democracy and government responsiveness do

not necessarily have to correlate. For example, Hartford (2005) suggests that even if the Chinese government acts in a responsive way and offers input channels for its citizens, this does not necessarily lead to democratization (Hartford 2005: 217). Lollar (2006), who conducted an analysis on e-government services, also found that there is no significant evidence that these services will foster democratization in China (Lollar 2006: 41). Since government responsiveness is not only possible to study in democracies but also in authoritarian systems, there are some studies which have focused on authoritarian government's responsiveness. The role of government responsiveness and government-citizen communication channels has been assessed by different scholars, and consensus on some explanations regarding why governments of authoritarian countries act responsive to their citizens could be reached.

As China is an authoritarian country, one main concern for researchers in the sinological research field has been to shed more light on the reason why mechanisms which foster participation, such as the existence of online complaint platforms, exist and what the purpose and role they have in an authoritarian system. Regarding the relevance of government responsiveness in an authoritarian country, consensus has been found by several researchers that authoritarian governments aim for gaining valuable information about problems and issues its population is facing which can help them to react to raised issues and be aware of existing problems which could lead to the system's instability (e.g.: Hartford 2005; Dimitrov 2014, 2015). By officially channeling people's grievances, it has also been argued that the government tries to prevent protests and non-official participation which could lead to the system's instability (e.g. Chen et al. 2016; Li 2014; Lorentzen 2013; O'Brien and Li 2006). Another important reason for why the regime emphasizes on responsiveness is the argument that by being responsive, its legitimacy can be strengthened (e.g. Lambach and Göbel 2010; Almén 2018). For the case of China with regards to the reasons for provided government responsiveness via e-governments, the forthcoming paper by Göbel and Li (2020) suggests that government responsiveness and accountability on a local level has been fostered by different factors. They identify "signals by the central government, the policy innovation paradigm and the availability of new technologies" (Göbel and Li 2020: 19) as the main drivers which started the process of enhancing and developing such mechanisms since the late 1990s³.

As can be seen above, there exist different approaches when it comes to the explanation of why authoritarian governments offer channels to interact with their citizens and thus become

³ More details on the development of online platforms can be found in the article "From Bulletin Boards to Big Data: The Origins and Evolution of China's Public Complaint Websites" by Göbel and Li (2020) and in chapter three of this master thesis

responsive by communicating with the people and reacting on their concerns. These assumptions are also relevant for the study conducted for this master thesis which assesses government responses to citizen appeals written by Chinese government officials. This is because the stated motives by the above outlined researchers for why government responsiveness is a phenomenon that can be observed in authoritarian countries have to be considered as the underlying context of the government-citizen communication. Furthermore, it could be possible to find clues of these studies' reasoning for the Chinese government's responsiveness in the contents of the analyzed government responses.

In the state of the art of government responsiveness, it could be found that several research papers focused on determinants of government responsiveness. Chen et al. (2016) found in their study that government responsiveness of county governments in China to online submitted complaints can be explained by the threat of collective action and fear of certain information reaching upper level governments. Distelhorst and Hou (2017) proposed a demand-driven logic for why constituency service exists in a nondemocratic environment like China. Almén (2018) assessed the role of political participation in China with regards to government responsiveness and found that by enabling participation, government responsiveness can be improved. This finding is in line with Cleary's (2007) findings for the case of Mexico. Butler and Broockman (2011) focused on measuring changing responsiveness levels depending on the ethnical background of the submitter of requests to state legislator. They found that requests which seemed to have been submitted by a person of color received fewer replies. Their approach to government responsiveness was limited to whether a request received a reply at all and did not consider any content or quality of government response. Su and Meng (2016) have conducted research about government responsiveness in China on a political online forum. The main finding of their study is, that government responsiveness can be considered as high, but selective. Important factors for how responsive the government acted was whether the citizen is a local, the submission was made collectively, the focus was laid upon a single task and an existing focus on economic growth. The submissions were the main concern and subject of analysis, whereas responsiveness was only measured by whether the government responded at all. The studies by Butler and Broockman (2011) and Su and Meng (2016) are an example of a focus on government responses, but no real analysis regarding the content of government responses has taken place which could give further qualitative insights.

Another field which can be regarded as being a part of the broad state of the art are studies which are related to e-government platforms, their management and the citizen's perception of

these platforms. Ong and Wang (2009) did a study which focused on the management of initiated contacts by citizens for the Taipei City Mayor's Mailbox with the findings that the different involved actors are shaping the Mailbox. They identify dynamics between citizens, the government and bureaucrats which give the citizens the role of being able to support the government in overseeing what work the administrative body of the government is doing (Ong; Wang 2009: 503). Jiang and Xu (2009) assessed the Chinese e-government in a different way by focusing on the communicative structure of the websites. Their findings indicate that it is possible for the Chinese government to improve the regime's legitimacy and mitigate social unrest. This finding can be said to be supported by the argument made by other scholars which ascribes government responsiveness in authoritarian regimes the role of reducing social instability and positively contributing to the regime's legitimacy. Jun et al. (2014) conducted a study which assessed the impact of the usage of e-government in China on the users' perception of the local government. They found that using e-government services lead to an improvement of the citizens' government perception and more satisfaction with the government. This article depicts the Chinese e-government as service-oriented and it is argued that transparency on these websites has a positive impact on the citizens' perception of the regime which can be further improved by enhancing the functions on e-government platforms. When it comes to the user's perception, the study conducted by Truex (2016) conducted a study with the focus on citizens' perception of reforms with participatory character and of government responsiveness in China and found, that politically excluded and less educated citizens experienced more satisfaction with government responsiveness.

One of the sub-questions raised by this master thesis is about how government responses reflect and are in line with official targets put forward by the government itself. A study that focused partly on a similar question was conducted by Tan et al. (2013), who sent questionnaires to Chinese citizens with the aim to assess their satisfaction with Chinese e-government services and found that the government does not meet the targeted quality and scope of what is wanted to be provided. The four government objectives for e-government services in China identified by the researchers were to provide information, online services, transparency, and openness and to reach out to citizens, as well as enable feedback and comments from them (Tan et al. 2013: 5). They see the biggest lack in inadequate promotion, lack of content and design of the website which were found to limit the value of the services the citizens receive. This approach on assessing e-government performance by considering government guidelines measured how successfully these guidelines are implemented by considering citizens' opinions and perceptions. This differs from the employed approach in this master thesis which measures the coherence of

contents found within government responses, which does not take into account the perceived quality of the government responses by the citizens.

The above studies are interesting and contributed largely to the understanding different mechanisms and factors which determine government responsiveness, how government responsiveness is perceived by the citizens and how the goals of implementing government responsiveness are met. Nevertheless, the definitions of government responsiveness of these studies are rather broad and do not always overlap with each other. Furthermore, none of these studies have conducted an in-depth analysis of government responsiveness assessed in terms of communicated contents by the government.

It needs to be noted that the study of government responsiveness in autocracies is not limited to China. One particularly interesting example is the field of studies about the so called “Bürgereingaben”, which can be translated to “citizen input”, that existed in the DDR⁴ (Deutsche Demokratische Republik) or GDR (German Democratic Republic) which existed from 1949 to 1989. A “Bürgereingabe” can be understood as a submitted complaint or appeal to governmental agencies (e.g. Bettin 2016). It can also be described as a crucial tool in order to settle conflicts between citizens and the state (Mühlberg 2000: 11). The existence of such a system in the GDR is interesting and shows that China is not the only non-democratic country which implemented such an option that reminds of procedures existing in democracies. There also exists a body of research regarding these submissions, such as the paper by Bruns (2012) who assessed submissions during that time with medical contents.

In the case of the GDR, it was argued that “Eingaben” were a manifestation of socialist democracy (Mühlberg 2000: 13), but the GDR had an authoritarian character (ibid.: 26). Thus, it has also been subject of analysis what the purpose of the “Eingaben” was and why they were frequently made use of during the time the GDR existed. Similar to the already above outlined reasons found for China and its complaint system, in this case it has been argued that the possibility to utter grievances through an official channel could be regarded as a “valve” for personal problems, but also as a way to express abuse by the state and party which was experienced during that time (ibid.: 26; 31). The state could have also used the inputs in order to correct and adjust political decisions (ibid.: 27) which can be related to the information-flow argument found in the state of the art outlined above.

⁴See also: Thurich (2011)

The last aspect of the wider state of the art are studies who made citizen appeals the subject of analysis. Just to mention a couple of studies, Distelhorst and Fu (2019) have analyzed citizen's complaints with regards to different citizen types being evident within the submissions. Jiang et al. (2019) analyzed how online submitted petitions could influence policies in China. Based on content analysis of submissions posted by citizens, they found that social welfare policies were emphasized on more. They reach the conclusion that through online participation, the quality of governance can be improved. Studies which assessed the contents of submitted appeals on Chinese online platforms can be regarded as the counterpart of the study conducted for this master thesis as they looked at the citizen side of the government-citizen communication, whereas this thesis focuses on the government side.

2.1.2. Narrow State of the Art

The narrow state of the art consists of selected studies which have dealt with the assessment of government responses. Since the situation regarding studies which have considered the content of Chinese government responses can be regarded as rather scarce, also selected papers which assessed other countries' government responses were included in the narrow state of the art.

Probably the most in-depth study regarding this topic was conducted by Cai and Zhou (2019) with their paper "Online Political Participation in China: Local Government and Differentiated Response". Within their study, they assessed how local governments in China handle online complaints and what types of responses exist. They additionally came up with an explanation about when and why governments use certain types of responses. For the latter question, they found that the main factors which impact the response type are pressure coming from the complaint and the cost in order to resolve the claimed issue by the complainant.

More important for this master thesis is their response classification, which will be outlined in more detail. They have looked at low-profile complaints, which was their pre-selective criterion, and firstly split the response types into "resolved" and "unresolved". One main finding was that the response speed, which was 5 days on average, did not predict whether a case got resolved or not, nor did it indicate anything about the response quality. Additionally, they identified five response modes being "(1) no response; (2) justification or explanation of the existing practice; (3) claiming that the case is being processed; (4) promising a resolution; and (5) resolution" (Cai and Zhou 2019: 12).

Table 3: Modes of Response

Target of complaint	Total no. of cases	Modes of response (%)				
		No response	Justification	Being processed	Promising to resolve	Resolved
Officials	118	3.4	52.5	25.4	3.4	15.3
Government agencies	224	0.4	65.2	16.1	8.9	9.4
Law enforcement agents	124	3.2	43.5	21.0	8.9	23.4
Non-government actors	486	1.2	33.5	22.4	10.9	31.9
Sub-total	878	1.6	44.8	21.2	9.2	23.2
Undefined targets	281	1.1	37.0	19.2	22.8	19.9
Total	1,159	1.5	42.9	20.7	12.5	22.4

Source:

Authors' collection.

This classification can be regarded as highly resolution oriented, except for category two, which relates to justification and explanation of a practice. The level of abstraction is rather high and no content related information about different claimed methods of handling the submission by the citizen get apparent with this sort of classification. This master thesis hopes to give more insight into different ways of responding to a citizen appeal, different modes of justification and argumentation used, and what kind of information can be found frequently within government responses.

The next study of the narrow state of the art is “Constituency Service under Nondemocratic Rule: Evidence from China” by Distelhorst and Hou (2017), where they dealt with the question of why nondemocratic regimes offer constituency service to the people. They found that based on their analysis on government responses from the platform “Mayor’s Mailbox”, the responsiveness was comparatively higher than in democracies with similar facilities offered to the public. The underlying mechanism of government responsiveness in an authoritarian regime like China was explained with “a demand-driven theory of nondemocratic constituency service” (Distelhorst and Hou 2017: 1024) which means that the information flow generated by citizen participation must be met accordingly with responsiveness.

In order to determine the quality of a responses, Distelhorst and Hou (2017) sent letters to different government agencies and grouped the responses in a binary manner as “helpful” and “not helpful”. It has not been further outlined how the categorization came about, even though it was claimed that more detailed measurement has been taken place, but due to reasons of comparability they have not been used. In order for a response to be coded as “helpful”, it had to contain “relevant policy or contact information of relevant bureaucracies” (Distelhorst and Hou 2017: 1031). In this sense, the degree of responsiveness can be understood as information based and not so much focused on a resolution as it could be found in the paper of Cai and Zhou (2019).

Another study conducted in relation to government responses of Chinese online complaint platforms is “Sources of Authoritarian Responsiveness: A Field Experiment in China” by Chen, Pan and Xu (2016) which was already introduced in the broader state of the art. As they also considered government responses within their analysis, their study was also considered for the narrow state of the art. They put government responses into three different categories: “(1) Deferral, (2) Referral, and (3) Direct Information” (Chen et al. 2016: 393). If the response did not contain information regarding the requested information, it was coded as “Deferral”, if the response referred to another agency which is responsible for the matter, it was coded as “Referral” and if the information was provided, it was coded as “Direct Information”. For that last category, the relevant information should include detailed information and next steps for the submitter as well as contact information for other agencies (Chen et al. 2016: 393f). The approach taken here is focused on responsibilities and provision of information.

Grohs et al. (2016) published an article with the title “Are Some Citizens More Equal than Others? Evidence from a Field Experiment”. They analyzed local government responses in Germany and focused on response speed, quality, and service orientation. The aim was to find whether there occurred discrimination based on ethnical background or gender with the finding that the empirical results suggested ethnical discrimination conditioned by gender. The coding scheme below shows how they analyzed the government responses:

Table 2 Coding Scheme by Grohs et al. 2016: 159

Table 1 Coding Scheme

Subindex	Incorporated Items	Scores	Maximum Score
Response speed	Duration in work days	Per work day, –1 point	15
Completeness	Responses to all subquestions (1)/(2) Comprehensibility and preparation of the response (1) / (2)	2 x 2 points each	8
Service orientation	Mention contact persons; (offer) to send additional information (3) Completeness of the response (4) Perception of the friendliness of the public administration/service (5)	1 point each Up to 2 points Up to 3 points	7
		Total	30

This study analyzed responses to similar submissions sent by the authors and did not target components of government responses in the first place. Thus, aspects such as information provided, and the tone of the response can be said to be at the center of this response-analysis approach.

The narrow state of the art showed different types of analysis of government responses, with different levels of detail regarding the analyzed contents and response types. Furthermore, the research objectives also differed from each other. These studies show and reconfirm again the

identified research gap as none of them conducted a comprehensive analysis of government responses with the goal of exploratively finding different patterns and contents in a systematic way.

2.2. Analytical-Theoretical Focus

Based on the above outlined and discussed narrow state of the art, the following aspects of a government response which were already identified were used as the basis for formulating the main categories of government response contents. The approaches taken by the studies from the narrow state of the art were considered together and based on their findings, the deductive categories for the qualitative analysis which serve as the analytical-theoretical focus could be outlined. This has been done in order to give the qualitative content analysis a scope and focus and enrich the already existing findings with new, inductively found manifestations of the deductively found categories.

Based on the narrow state of the art, the *Justification and Argumentation Category* was identified. It is reflected in Cai and Zhou's (2019) study within their category "justification or explanation of the existing practice". Additionally, the response type "Deferral" which was identified by Chen et al. (2016) and refers to cases where the responding party argues that there has been a lack of information shows that there exist justifying and argumentative parts in government responses.

The next category was the *Information Category*. This aspect was identified as well by Cai and Zhou (2019) in the second part of their "justification or explanation of the existing practice" category. Moreover, Grohs et al. (2016) referred to informational content within government responses such as contact information or additional information given by the responding party. Distelhorst and Hou (2017) also featured aspects of informational contents by defining a "helpful" response as containing "relevant policy or contact information of relevant bureaucracies" (Distelhorst and Hou 2017: 1031). Lastly, Chen et al. (2016) also referred to informational aspects of responses by introducing the category "Direct Information".

The two categories „claiming that the case is being processed" and "promising a resolution" found by Cai and Zhou (2019) do not include how cases are being processed or how resolutions are being achieved. For this reason, the next deductive category for the content analysis is the *Measure Category* and concerned with different types of measures which were inductively identified and put into different subcategories over the course of the analysis. Since the time

factor of measures; meaning whether work is in progress, has already been completed or will be done; could also be relevant when it comes to assessing different measures described within government responses, it was also considered during analysis. Regarding the time factor it has to be noted that due to the complexity, for this master thesis it was only considered when coding the random sample but it did not get taken into account when it comes to the overall analysis.

One aspect that has only been found by Grohs et al. (2016) out of the considered studies was the expression of emotional and empathetic content. They assessed the friendliness of a response which leads to the establishment of the category “empathy and emotion”. That means that for the conducted analysis it was not just looked for friendliness, but for different manifestations of expressions which can be related to an emotional or empathetic category.

Another aspect that could be found within several studies introduced in the narrow state of the art relates to results and outcomes which can be found within government responses and will be referred to as the *Outcome Category*. Distelhorst and Hou (2017) categorized responses into the two categories “helpful” and “not helpful”, which could also said to be related to the information category, but it has some implications for the outcome or result a response offers as well. Cai and Zhou (2019) offer the category “resolution” and “promising a resolution”, which can be also regarded as outcome oriented. Since it is not attempted to make assumptions about whether a case has been actually resolved in a satisfactory way even if it was claimed to be the case, the analytical focus for the content analysis was laid upon outcomes of specific measures which were identified under the above derived measure category.

Time factors, completeness in relation to a submission and a measurement of helpfulness or responsiveness as put forward in some studies of the state of the art were not considered because they can be said to be not content related⁵, use the submission as a baseline for analysis⁶ or can be said too subjective and deviating from the chosen analytical focus and the proposed research question. Thus, the following table will sum up the theoretically and thus deductively generated analytical focus which was derived from the state of the art:

⁵ Such as the time aspect

⁶ Such as completeness or helpfulness

Table 3 Deductive Analytical Focus and Categories

Analytical Focus and Categories	State of the Art Background
Measures	Cai and Zhou (2019)
Outcomes	Cai and Zhou (2019); Distelhorst and Hou (2017)
Argumentation and Justification	Cai and Zhou (2019), Chen et al. (2016)
Information	Cai and Zhou (2019); Grohs et al. (2016); Distelhorst and Hou (2017); Chen et al. (2016)
Empathy and Emotion	Grohs et al. (2016)

2.3. Public Transcripts

Within this chapter, the concept of *Public Transcripts* and its relevance for this master thesis will be further elucidated. Since this approach is used as the underlying perspective when analyzing the government responses, it thus can be said that it will be utilized as a “theoretical lens” and has great importance as it is one of the main theoretical concepts for this master thesis. Within this subchapter, the problem of censorship will be addressed as well since it goes well together with the explanation of the concept of *Public Transcripts*.

In the context of Chinese online complaint platforms and the submissions and responses which are made publicly accessible, Distelhorst and Fu (2019) used the concept of *Public Transcripts* to analyze and describe the online communication process of citizens and government officials. They understand *Public Transcripts* as a staged interaction which does not reveal true underlying feelings of each party, but reveals the power dynamic between the two parties (Distelhorst and Fu 2019: 108). The concept of *Public Transcripts* was originally developed by James C. Scott (1990) in his work “Domination and the Arts of Resistance”.

A public transcript is, as defined by Scott (1990) “[...] subordinate discourse in the presence of the dominant [...]” (Scott 1990: 4). It gets apparent that power relations between the dominant and subordinate are a vital part of the concept which is used to get further insight into how power relations get apparent and manifest themselves in official interactions between for example political officials and citizens and also how to interpret them. Following the logic of Scott’s (1990) argumentation, he defines the counterpart of *Public Transcripts* as *Hidden*

Transcripts with the definition that they refer to “[...] discourse that takes place “offstage”, beyond direct observation by powerholders” (ibid.: 4).

Because within this paper, the online enacted communication between the government and citizens in China takes place on a public stage, it falls under the concept of *Public Transcripts*. Further characteristics of *Public Transcripts* are that the level of ritualistic and stereotyped character of the communication depends on the difference of power that exists between both interacting parties (ibid.: 18). To put it differently, the more “unequal” both parties are with regards to their power, the more use they would make of rather predefined ways and patterns of communication. When looking at *Public Transcripts*, it can be said that they do most of the time not depict a genuine conversation that reveals true feelings and thoughts on both sides (Distelhorst and Fu 2019: 108), but Scott (1990) also concedes that it cannot be generalized as well that everything said in *Hidden Transcripts* is utterly genuine and everything said in the context of *Public Transcripts* to be utterly false or ingenuine. (Scott 1990: 5).

Public Transcripts are rather an idealized self-portrait of the dominant actor which has the aim “[...] to be impressive, to affirm and naturalize the power of dominant elites, and to conceal or euphemize the dirty linen of their rule” (ibid.: 18). Seeing the online posted responses to citizen appeals in the light of that definition, a different way of understanding the topic of censorship, which is relevant when talking about the Chinese online sphere, becomes possible.

In the Chinese context it has to be noted that the internet cannot be regarded as a free and liberating space. It should rather be seen as a space that is ought to be controlled and configured, while at the same time utilizing the possibility of the internet to generate regime legitimacy (Jiang and Xu 2009: 177). Thus, censorship in the Chinese online sphere is implemented by the Chinese government in order “to ensure healthy social values, deter gambling, eliminate porn, punish swindlers, and excise the unhealthy views of religious cults, ethnonationalists, and democratic reformers” (King et al. 2013: 299). Since *Public Transcripts* are per-se a type of communication that enables the dominant party to set the stage, guide the conversation and highlight only the positive attributes about themselves which also might serve the purpose of strengthening power; censorship can be regarded as a tool of the political elite in China in order to only display information and interactions online which they want to be seen and which are potentially favorable for them.

Online responses in the context of *Public Transcripts* can thus be regarded as the implementation of the way the Chinese government wants to portray itself in the government-citizen

communication. By communicating in such a way, insights into goals, purposes, and ways of providing the service of an online complaint platform in China can be gained. Thus, the way how the government responds to submitted appeals could also be considered as a reflection of the way it wants to show the handling of grievances, problems and questions submitted by its population. In that sense, censorship is only another tool that enables the government to show the “face” it intends to show. It could even be said that censorship is helpful to get a clear picture of the intentional communication of the Chinese government with its citizens. For this master thesis, understanding the submissions and responses on online complaint platforms as an intentional, selective and potentially pre-filtered communication in many cases that is displayed online, censorship can be seen as an advantage rather than a disadvantage that biases the data that is analyzed.

Lastly, by seeing the responses as a part of a *Public Transcript* in the above sense, it is interesting to compare the empirical findings of how the government presents itself and what it provides within the responses with the official stance on this aspect taken by the central government. Therefore, the central government guidelines have been used as a benchmark in order to compare the observed conveyed image of the government within the responses with the officially favorable image the government wants to convey. Thus, when discussing the findings regarding their alignment with the officially announced goals and targets regarding online complaint platforms from the central government, it is possible to assess how the self-display of the government agencies on different levels reflects the outlined guidelines by the central government.

3. The Chinese Online Complaint System

This part of the master thesis will provide more contextual information on the online complaint system in China and its background. Firstly, the petition system in China will be introduced shortly. In the following two subchapters, online complaint platforms and their development in China will be discussed and differentiated from online petitions and petitions in general. The last subchapter will outline the central government's approach and requirements for online complaint platforms based on selected documents, which will serve as the basis for integrating the findings of the response-analysis.

3.1. Petitions in China

Petitioning enables the public to interact with the political level and put forward their complaints and concerns. This mechanism can thus be regarded as closely related to the topic of online complaints and the respective platforms in China. Thus, introducing how petitioning in China came about and what the current regulations regarding it are, is relevant in order to further understand online complaints, which, as will be shown later, have to be differentiated from petitions even though there seems to be a slight overlap when it comes to their purpose.

In China, already during imperial times it was possible to submit a petition (信访 *xinfang*) to the emperor, which was crucial in order to avert the threat of censorship of important information on lower administrative levels. It can be said that these early mechanisms can be regarded as the basis for today's petition system (Minzner 2006: 114). Since the foundation of the People's Republic of China (PRC), petitions have existed on Chinese territory and it can be said that especially in autocracies, they are important for the public in order to voice problems and have a way to officially channel their grievances, which is not possible otherwise (Dimitrov 2015: 57, 67f). How the current petition system in China emerged and what the historical background regarding this process is can be further found at Minzner (2006) and will not be discussed in more detail within this master thesis.

Today, the petition bureaus can be found on different administrative levels and are most of the time at the same location as party institutions. This is an indicator for the great power concentration that is apparent in the PRC today (Minzner 2006: 116). Minzner (2006) states that the success rate of petitions in China can be regarded as quite low which is caused by the fact that

the normal procedure is a transfer of the issue brought forward to a lower administrative and more local level, where it often occurs that the case gets dismissed (ibid.: 116f).

The primary source for how the current petition system works in China are the “Regulations Regarding the Petition System” (信访条例 Xinfang Tiaoli), which can be found on the website of the “National Public Complaints and Proposals Administration”. It can be seen that there exist different regulations for different regions within China, and also certain ministries. The most “central” document is the in 2005 revised „Regulations Regarding the Petition System”, which is a decree of the PRC’s State Council (State Council 2005).

Because an in-depth analysis of the regulations would go beyond the scope of this chapter, only the eight articles of the first section “Chapter I General Provisions” will be briefly outlined in order to give an idea about what the regulations cover. The very first article sums up the purpose of the regulations the following way:

“These Regulations are formulated for the purposes of enhancing relations between the people's governments at all levels and the people, protecting the lawful rights and interests of letter-writers and visitors, and maintaining a good order in letter-writing and visiting” (ibid.).

The role of the people who should make use of this channel of uttering grievances seems to be central according to this official document. The remaining articles 2-6 are largely targeted at departments who should handle the petitions, rather than at the people. Nevertheless, the duties of the department can be said to serve the people and by obliging them to handle the matters, serving the people’s interests could be achieved that way.

Article two defines the term “信访” (xinfang), which can be literally translated as “letters and visits” and refers to petitions, the following way:

“citizens, legal persons or other organizations give information, make comments or suggestions or lodge complaints to the people's governments at all levels and the relevant departments of the people's governments at or above the county level through correspondence, E-mails, faxes, phone calls, visits, and so on, which are dealt with by the relevant administrative departments according to law” (ibid.).

The other articles outline duties for the petition agencies which are that handling and coordination of the submissions should happen in a lawful, timely and local manner; that submissions should be listened and responded to; that suggestions should be made in order to improve the

government's policies; and that departments at lower levels should receive guidance from other departments. Additionally, article seven and eight outline that good and constructive behavior by different actors including the petitioners should be rewarded, and actors who do not act according to the regulations should be punished (ibid.).

Thus, it can be seen that there exists a framework which guides the petition departments when it comes to how to handle different submissions. Of course, these are the most general petition regulations by the State Council (2005), and more detailed information about the procedures can be found on the website of the "National Public Complaints and Proposals Administration". For further understanding, the overview given by Minzner (2006) who assessed the regulations and their implications in detail could also be consulted.

There have been some flaws of the petition system identified which shall be outlined briefly. Minzner (2006) points out that the regulations fail to address detailed information about how petitions should be resolved and what implications a solution really has (Minzner 2006: 126f). Another issue is the partial overlap of the petition system with the judicial system in China. Gao and Long (2015) have highlighted several shortcomings of the petition system on a micro and macro level, whereas the macro level refers to the problem of an overlap between the legal and petition system. Even though people get encouraged to make use of the judicial system for cases which should be handled in that way, a preference of the petition system gets apparent because it offers benefits like lower cost, higher efficiency and more straightforwardness than pursuing the legal way of dispute resolution. Additionally, due to the pressure on local governments to keep social stability, it could be likely that disputes are resolved with more benefits for the petitioner (Gao and Long 2015: 38ff).

It can be seen that the petition system in China is a channel frequently utilized by citizens in order to address their issues outside of the legal system. Even though choosing the petition channel is often not successful, it still seems to be more promising than choosing the legal way in order to address grievances. The petition system is defined in terms of regulations, which gives them a specific scope and guides petition agencies regarding their responsibilities. The aim and purpose of petitions are also defined within the regulations, but there is still a lack of clarity when it comes to how petitions should be dealt with and resolved in practice. Since there also exists the possibility to submit petitions online⁷, they are related to online complaints which also serve the purpose to address grievances.

⁷ See e.g.: National Petition Bureau

3.2. Online Complaint Platforms

3.2.1. Differentiation and Definitions

It is important to differentiate petitions and online complaints and submissions since they are a part of different systems and have differing implications and practices. Above, the practice of petitions and their regulations were outlined. It could be shown that in China, the process of submitting petitions, who the responsible departments are and what formal ways of handling them are, are defined by official regulations. As there exists the possibility to also submit petitions online and online complaint platforms sometimes appear to be quite similar to petition portals content wise, it is not always clear if the concerning platform is indeed a part of the petition system and thus falls under the petition regulations or not.

Lang (2020) postulates that it is necessary to distinguish these two channels which can be used by the public to submit their appeals because of the differences regarding the regulations they fall under. As opposed to submissions on online complaint platforms, online petitions are normally not made public and are thus a separate channel (Göbel and Li 2020: 5). Also, on the national and provincial level, petition platforms are run in a standardized way which is also not the case for online complaint platforms (Lang 2020: 18f). Furthermore, on online complaint platforms, submissions do not only cover complaints, but also other types of submissions like for example suggestions (建议 *jiānyì*), requests (咨询 *zixun*), seeking for help (求助 *qiuzhu*) and gratitude letters (感谢 *gǎnxiè*) (ibid.: 18). Some of these options can be seen on the government website of Beijing under the tab “政民互动” (*zhengmin hudong*), which means government-people communication. There, it is possible to submit either a complaint, request, or suggestion (The People’s Government of Beijing Municipality). As can be seen when looking at the petition regulations, citizens can “reflect a situation”⁸ and “put forward suggestions, opinions or complaints”⁹ (State Council 2005), which is quite similar to the submission types which can be found on online complaint platforms.

Based on the above outlined characteristics of complaint platforms, a few definitions must be made for this master thesis. Within this paper, the term “online complaint platform” is used for all platforms that collect online submissions and do not fall under the petition regulations. Since the messages posted on these platforms are not only complaints, they will be referred to with

⁸ 反映情况 (*fanying qingkuang*)

⁹ 提出建议、意见或者投诉请求 (*tichu jianyi, yijian huozhe tousu qingqiu*)

more neutral terms such as “submission”, “appeal”, or simply “message”. The citizens who submit their appeals online will be referred to as “submitter” or “citizen”, whereas the responding actors will be referred to as “government agency”, “department”, or “responding actor”.

3.2.2. Origin and Development of Online Complaint Platforms

The background regarding how the online complaint system in China came about has been assessed in a comprehensive way by Göbel and Li (2020). Due to the fact that their work can be considered as the state-of-the-art assessment of the development of complaint platforms and there has no other study been found by the author which offered a similarly comprehensive overview, their paper was used as the main source for this subchapter. They assessed policy papers and conducted interviews with local leaders in order to trace back the emergence of the phenomenon of online complaint channels in China. Thus, they shed more light on the interplay of requirements by the central government, resulting policy innovation and the role of technical development which led to new options of public administration. The development of online platforms shall now be briefly outlined according to their study.

The first online complaint platforms in China that made submitted complaints and their responses publicly available on their websites were operated in the two cities Nanjing and Hangzhou. They have been subject of analysis in the study conducted by Hartford (2005), who assessed the nature of these platforms and derived implications with regards to their function for the government. According to Göbel and Li (2020), no obvious sign from the central government led to the emergence of these platforms, but potentially an existing policy innovation imperative¹⁰ and outlined expectations by the central government towards the local governments could have led to new innovations on the local level (Göbel and Li 2020: 7f).

Important factors like problems regarding the government-citizen relationship caused by a lack of transparency and shortage of publicly available information regarding regulations dating back to the 1990s invoked an approach, that citizens should be more involved and have a function of monitoring local governments. Additionally, more transparency and open information should be provided in order to enhance the quality of relationship between government and people. The number of platforms rose successively since 2001 and even though it could seem like citizens get empowered through holding a controlling and monitoring function, the benefits are largely on the side of the government (ibid.: 10ff).

¹⁰ More information about the policy innovation imperative can be found at Göbel and Heberer (2017)

Interestingly, Göbel and Li (2020) connected the different rating functions on government websites to business related models which employed rating functions on online shopping platforms also in the early 2000s. This aspect got also confirmed by their interview partners. The logic of generating trust by reviews of commercial products seemed to be applied to government services as well (ibid.: 12f), as Göbel and Li (2020) put it: “officials calculate that just as good product quality and speedy delivery will enhance the reputation of online shops, responsiveness to public needs will increase public trust in the government” (ibid.: 13).

Throughout the years, the messages coming from the central government got clearer. In 2010 it got announced that every administration must communicate with the public through complaint platforms. In 2012, the province level governments were asked to construct online platforms in order to collect suggestions, opinions, and complaints. Furthermore, in 2013 the operation of phone hotlines, complaint websites and microblogs became obligatory for local governments. It was found that between 2011 and 2013 the number of these online platforms rose from less than 1000 to 258.737 (ibid.: 13f). The call for openness of information, closely working together with citizens, further monitoring, predicting and shaping of their needs and also for a more standardized way of operating the platforms was further emphasized on by the central government in documents in the timeframe from 2011-2016 (ibid.: 15ff). Thus, it can be assumed that the local platforms might have adapted to these stipulated requirements. Changes on online complaint platforms were confirmed in the case study conducted by Lang (2020).

The analysis of Göbel and Li (2020) illustrates how these platforms came about, and also contextualizes their emergence by analyzing documents by the central government¹¹. Drawing on their findings, it can be said that online complaint platforms seemed to have emerged in a complex interplay of the central government and local initiatives. Furthermore, they seem to be a result of policy innovation which was taking place on the local level of the Chinese government with reciprocal influence and guidance provided by the central government. Of course, technical possibilities and inspiration coming from other fields such as online commerce also play a crucial role when looking at the development of online complaint platforms.

Referring back to the broader state of the art concerning the reason of why these platforms exist, it can be seen that the argument that because China is an authoritarian state, it has to rely on feedback channels from the population in order to generate a valuable information flow, is in line with the findings of Göbel and Li (2020). Additionally, the call for more transparency,

¹¹ For more detailed information about the development and different factors regarding the emergence of the online complaint platforms, see Göbel and Li (2020)

strengthening of the relationship between citizens and the government and thus enhancing the legitimacy of the regime seem to be in line with the studies referred to in the state of the art chapter which put forward the corresponding argument. This reasoning also gets reflected by their analysis of the central government's documents.

3.2.3. Current Situation

Even though the central government has called for a more consistent way of operating the online complaint platforms within China, it can be said that they are still quite diverse when it comes to their operation mode. Online complaint platforms exist on different administrative levels and have different responsibilities and operation modes¹². Especially on a local level, they show a big diversity which is caused by the bureaucratic challenge of standardizing them, even though the central government has clearly uttered the demand of unification and standardization (e.g. Lang 2020: 20). For the overview of the current state, the main source is the forthcoming master thesis written by Lang (2020) who largely contributed to the research about the online complaint platforms by emphasizing on the fact that there exist different types of online complaint platforms and showing their development over time. No other available source offered a similarly comprehensive comparison of existing online complaint platforms.

As could be shown in the previous chapters, this could be explained by the fact that the emergence of online complaint platforms within China can be regarded as complex and diverse. When referring to these platforms, it is important to keep in mind that they are not all run under the same standards, that they have different features and peculiarities and must be differentiated from traditional petitions.

Currently, there co-exist several different channels and possibilities for citizens to interact with the Chinese government and bring forward their appeals. The following table which has been created by Lang (2020), who assessed and discussed the differences and developments of online complaint platforms, sums up common categories and types of complaint channels within China which are differentiated by the mediums used, whether they are regulated by petition guidelines and whether they are made public:

¹² For a more differentiated overview, see Lang 2020: 26f

Table 4¹³ Comparison of different complaint channels by Lang 2020: 23

	Medium	Petition regulation	Public
<i>Traditional Petition</i>	<i>Letter, visit</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
<i>12345 Hotline</i>	<i>Phone</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>No</i>
Mayor's Mailbox, 12345 Platforms	Website, E-Mail, app, phone, fax, Weibo, Weixin ¹⁴	Partly	Partly
LLMB	Website, app	No	Yes
Sunshine Petition	Website, E-Mail, app, phone, fax, Weibo ¹⁵ , Weixin	Yes	Partly

For this master thesis, only the online platforms which make posted submissions and their responses publicly available will be further discussed and introduced because they are the sources of the random sample of responses that has been analyzed. The relevant platforms from the above table are the non-italic ones which will be introduced briefly.

Platforms like the “Mayor’s Mailbox”¹⁶, “12345 Platforms”¹⁷ and forums like “留言板” (Liuyanban) are run by local governments and thus are a part of local complaint platforms. They belong to a single locality, for example a province, county, city, or district (Lang 2020: 19f). On the other hand, central platforms have the characteristic that they accept submissions from more than one locality. The centralized platform “Local Leader Message Board”, which can be seen in the table above as the abbreviation “LLMB”, was set up in 2006 by the central government and enables party secretaries and governors to respond to submissions publicly. On the provincial level, it was found that 19 provinces set up their own ways of handling the posted appeals on the LLMB (Su and Meng 2016: 54; Lang 2020: 21).

A special case which has been found to be hard to distinguish from the petition system are the so-called Sunshine Petitions (阳光信访 Yangguang Xinfang). They started off as a research

¹³ Translation from German into English by the author

¹⁴ WeChat, a social media app which is heavily used in China

¹⁵ A similar platform to Twitter

¹⁶ For example: Beijing’s Mayors Mailbox (市长信箱 Shizhang Xinxiang) is targeted locally at citizens to submit messages with a pre-defined scope and content (General Office of the People’s Government of Beijing)

¹⁷ These platforms emerged from the 12345 complaint hotlines which originated as phone hotlines to the mayor already in 1983 in Shenyang. For more information, see Lang 2020: 17f. An example is the 12345 platform of Suzhou (Suzhou Convenience Service Center)

project in the province Jiangsu with a duration of seven years from 2006-2013. Some platforms seem to fall under the regulations of the Sunshine Petitions which meant to make the process of petitioning more transparent and efficient by making it public and using different channels (Lang 2020: 21f). Furthermore, the process of petitioning is claimed to be simplified by this new form of petitioning online and there was also a feature added that allows petitioners to rate the government services.

The analyzed sample includes responses from the above introduced platforms which meet the criteria of being not part of the traditional petition system. Instead, they come from the online complaint system that has undergone some changes over time. It can be seen that even though there have been signals of centralizing the complaint platforms and certain changes in that direction were and are being implemented, there are still different types of online complaint platforms with local differences¹⁸. Due to the complexity, it sometimes remains unclear what type of platform is being dealt with.

3.3. The Central Government's Guidelines

In order to outline the guidelines and principles of the Chinese government which are related to the online complaint platforms, different documents which were issued by high level political institutions within China were consulted. As on local levels and platforms the descriptions and responsibilities might differ from locality to locality¹⁹, it was decided to only focus on the general party line and thus considering only guidelines addressed to the more local levels about what is expected to be provided with the online complaint platforms.

As the analyzed responses come from different years and there have been different guidelines issued by the central government over the years, the stances found within government statements will be illustrated over the years in order to make the overall findings integrable and interpretable in the context of official guidelines. Since within the scope of this master thesis it was not possible to conduct a broad and diachronic analysis of government documents with relevant contents, it will be drawn on crucial documents that were found in this regard by Göbel and Li (2020) who analyzed the development of online complaint platforms including an assessment of statements by the central government in this regard. The government documents will be analyzed with a focus on outlined requirements or guidelines which can be related to

¹⁸ As found by Lang (2020) who assessed these platform's changes over time

¹⁹ As already discussed earlier in this paper, also see Lang (2020)

how online complaint platforms should be operated and what the different administrative levels of the Chinese governments should provide to the people. Due to the reason that the time scope of the analyzed responses ranges from 2006-2018, documents of different years ranging from 2000 to 2016 were considered and assessed.

It is not a focus of this paper how different government documents impact how the government responds. Therefore, the differing years of the analyzed submissions have not been related to different releases of government documents. This can be justified because government complaint platforms as are a product of top-down and bottom-up processes, thus not directly driven by government documents. Furthermore, the development can be regarded as going in one direction, meaning that there have not been significant changes of these platform's general aim and purpose since their inception, at least to the best knowledge of the author after consulting relevant literature and the analyzed government documents.

As Göbel and Li (2020) already pointed out, it can be said that the central government had a rather passive role when it came to the implementation of the first online complaint platforms in China (Göbel and Li 2020: 2). They identified a document issued in the year 2000 as a reaction to problems with lack of transparency of information on the local level which contains instructions for the local townships to employ more openness in their administration (ibid.: 10). The two authors argue that the basic principles of openness and interaction can be regarded as the foundation of the online complaint platforms which can be found today (ibid.: 9). Therefore, the call for openness and interaction can be regarded as an important theme that can be found within government documents related to the implementation of e-government and government-citizen communication.

With regards to the online complaint platforms which emerged first in 2001 in Nanjing and Hangzhou without a direct order from the central government, the document with the title “Notice of the General Office of the CCP²⁰ Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council on Promoting Open Administration at Township Government²¹” stipulates that open administration should be implemented on town and township level. The reasoning behind the call for open administration is, for example, to maintain a good relationship with the people and to enable supervision and operation of administrative power. The main message can be said to be that information about administration and economic management, village affairs and

²⁰ Chinese Communist Party

²¹ The translations for the titles of the government documents which are assessed in this subchapter have been adopted from Göbel and Li (2020)

background information about certain procedures should be made public. It is expressed that concerns of the public and unjust behavior should be handled with openness. The need for collecting opinions from the population through telephones, supervision mailboxes and other channels is also expressed. Interestingly, the aspect of supervision (监督 jiandu) by the masses is highlighted several times within the document as well (General Office of the CCP Central Committee 2000). Overall, this document heavily emphasizes on the importance of openness, transparency, and supervision by the masses in order to detect problems on the local level of government.

The idea of online supervision is again brought up in a document issued in 2002 by the General Office of the CCP Central Committee with the title “Notice of the General Office of the CCP Central Committee and the General Office of State Council Regarding the Distribution of the ‘National Informatization Leading Small Group’s Guiding Opinions on China’s E-Government Construction’” which is addressed to government organs on the province level and other central high level ministries and commissions. This document can be said to be the first idea for the implementation of e-government in China of the Chinese central government. Relevant points outlined in this document are, besides the need for supervision, the need to serve the people better. Government work should be done people-oriented and it is again highlighted that information should be provided to the people via online government platforms (General Office of the CCP Central Committee 2002). The government builds on already published information in the earlier document regarding open information and supervision by the masses as vital topics. Also, the service orientation towards the masses is highlighted, but the document lacks in-depth details in how to implement a better service quality for the citizens.

In 2005, the General Office of the CCP Central Committee published a document with the name “Opinion of the General Office of the CCP Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council on Further Enforcing Open Administration”. This document builds on the already published document about open administration and is this time directed not only to the township level, but also to the other administrative levels. It was stated that the implementation of open government affairs has been going on steadily and that also channels for the masses have been put into place. The document outlines that these channels were used to discuss political matters, serve the purposes of e.g. supervising the government’s administrative work, strengthening the relationship between the people and the party and promote administrative work according to law. The people should be provided with a convenient service that protects and grants their rights and enables them to supervise work done by different government agencies. When it

comes to the citizen's rights, it is outlined that they shall be able to participate, supervise and gain information. Thus, different improvements like providing different administrative services online, offering help and enabling inquiry, complaints and consultation should be made. It is also made clear that if cadres do not work according to the interests of the masses, they will face punishment (General Office of the CCP Central Committee 2005). Again, no concrete way of how to respond and how to handle certain services were given in detail.

In 2008, the State Council of the PRC published regulations on open government information. It puts forward different regulations on the topic of disclosure of government information and can thus be regarded as relevant when it comes to interact with the submissions on the online complaint platforms. Within this document, ways of how to disclose information to citizens can be found. It is stipulated that if the information can be disclosed, the citizen has to be informed of the way of obtaining the information, if it falls under non-disclosure, the reasons for why the information cannot be shared should be explained. Additionally, it is stated that if the public agency can determine the source of the government information requested, the applicant shall be provided with the name and contact information of the administrative agency. If the submitted content is not clear and does thus not allow an answer from the government agency, the applicant needs to be informed and notified to make the content clearer. Now also a time limit is given, which is 15 days for a reply and an extension of another 15 days if needed in which case the applicant must be informed. If a third party is involved, the days which are needed to get the relevant information of the third party are not counted. In case the information cannot be provided, materials, copies or forms for consultation have to be arranged for the submitter (State Council 2008). The outlined relevant regulations of this document for the way the government agencies should respond to citizen appeals are more detailed and clearer compared to earlier documents which did not address the interactional aspect with the people yet.

The next document consulted was published in 2010 by the State Council and has the title "Opinions of the State Council on Strengthening the Building of Law-Based Administration", it says that the disclosed information should be accurate, specific and timely and that the people who apply for information must be responded to within the time limit. Under the point of strengthening administrative supervision and accountability, the document points out that the channels for supervision by the masses should be broadened, their rights should be protected, which refers to the right to supervise the government according to law. The complaint system should be improved, and in order to expose illegal behavior, public opinion has to be valued. It is also put forward that the problems and issues reported by the masses should be seriously

investigated and verified, handled according to law, and the results should be published. Regarding conflict resolution, the role of mediation is highlighted. In cases where problems cannot be resolved and there is no option of reforming a certain mechanism, an explanation and more information about the underlying reasoning has to be communicated. If no agreement can be reached through mediation, decisions still must be made timely (State Council 2010). The document highlights again the importance of the communication channels and the purpose of supervision is mentioned as in the previous documents. Additionally, information is provided about how the government agencies are expected to handle inputs from citizens.

One year later in 2011, the General Office of the CCP Central Committee published a document with the title “Notice of the General Office of CCP Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council on Issuing the ‘Opinions on Further Promoting Open Government and Enhancing Government Services’”. This document highlights again the importance of information disclosure. It also states that serving the masses has been improved, but that there are still shortcomings like a lack of standardization of procedures. One requirement put forward is that conditions should be created that enable the people to understand the government work and also enable them to supervise it. Government work should furthermore be conducted in the interest of the people, and their input should be facilitated. This document also highlights the so-called service centers²² and their role for the government. It is put forward that the government should be service oriented; government service platforms should be improved, and the masses satisfied. When it comes to the operation of service centers, it is stated that practical problems for the masses should be solved and that if more than two departments are involved, parallel examination and approval should be implemented. The matters settled should be made public. Besides reemphasizing on the importance of supervision by the people, it is further argued that problems that are reflected by the masses in the form of complaints should be solved in a serious manner. The role of who is responsible for certain matters is highlighted and requested to be investigated (General Office of the CCP Central Committee 2011).

In 2013, the General Office of the State Council sent out the document with the title “Opinion of the General Office of the State Council Regarding Further Strengthening of Open Government’s Responsiveness to Major Concerns in Society and Improving the Public Confidence in Government”. It also contains interesting points relevant for understanding China’s vision when

²² An example for a service center is the service center of Haikou city which includes several services by the government, also a message platform which is called “Leaders Mailbox” (领导信箱 lingdao xinxiang) which can be found under the point “Interactive Communication” (互动交流 hudong jiaoliu) (Haikou City Government Service Center)

it comes to how to operate the online public complaint platforms and communication channels. Since there have been some problems with the implementation of government information disclosure regulations, this document was formulated. The identified issues were for example untimely government information disclosure or no responses given to citizens. It is argued that these issues have led to a worsening of the government image and credibility. The important aspects are that responses should be made in a proper way; false rumors should be clarified, and information released. Especially when it comes to public issues with importance, an active response manner is required that includes facts, clarification, information about policy measure and processing results. It is requested that public suggestions and situations reflected by the citizens should be accepted, and public comments and suggestions should be invited. Furthermore, the document stipulates that public opinion collection and response mechanisms should be improved, misunderstandings should be clarified, and doubts captured. When it comes to how the government should respond, it is highlighted that facts should be used over empty preaching. A positive image should be conveyed that fosters understanding and trust among citizens. Additionally, the need for monitoring and reporting the public opinion is expressed (General Office of the State Council 2013). The document shows that the government image is of great important when it comes to government-citizen interactions. The submitted messages are perceived as a valuable information source, but the responses can be regarded as representing the face of the government to the people which is why different response-manners that should be adopted were highlighted in this document.

In a later document published in 2014 by the General Office of the State Council which, similar to the document published in 2010 that was analyzed earlier in this chapter, stresses the role of law when it comes to government work. Furthermore, this document contains points which are relevant for the understanding of which vision the central government of China has when it comes to the online complaint platforms. It puts forward that government websites are important for information disclosure and there should be responsiveness when it comes to submitted concerns. As there have been problems when it came to government work with the people, the credibility of the government was affected. In order to overcome these issues, the websites should be transformed and improved in order to deliver more timely and accurate information and have the role of an interactive service platform. The outlined basic principles particularly stress the importance of working for and with the people and to develop a good relationship between the government and the people. The former should lead to an improvement of the government's image. It is stressed that the government has the duty to listen to public and social concerns and responsiveness is required. Like several of the former assessed documents, this

document as well features the important role of supervision by the public. When it comes to how the government should respond and work regarding submitted messages, it is highlighted that handling the related work should be done according to law. Important information regarding procedures and facts should be published. It is stated that the department and units relevant for the cases should respond in a positive way and have the task to “clarify policies, resolve doubts, resolve conflicts and straighten out emotions”²³ (General Office of the State Council 2014). The next point with relevance is strengthening interactive communication with the people. It is stated that public sentiment should be understood, questions should be answered, and the submitted messages should be studied and judged in a comprehensive way. The responses given by the departments have to be meaningful, which is not further clarified, and have to be provided within 7 or 15 days (ibid.).

The last document that will be considered as basis and source for the underlying guidelines by the central government for the online complaint platforms is a document with the title “Guiding Opinion of the General Office of the State Council Regarding the Acceleration of ‘Internet + Government Services’” published by the State Council of the PRC in 2016 and was directed to all levels of government. It builds on criticism regarding how work on online services has been conducted so far. With regards to online complaints, the document emphasizes that high importance should be placed on solving the issues reflected by the masses. It is also emphasized that the development has to be coordinated and different responsibilities for certain concerns should be made clear. Within part two, the optimization and reconstruction of government services are discussed. The online service process should be made easier and processing time should be limited. It is highlighted that redundant work should be avoided and public participation should be promoted. Also favorable is the encouragement of feedback on the service experience of the citizens in order to further improve the work. As can also be seen in some of the above outlined documents, this document contains the demand to improve the government credibility by understanding the social conditions and public opinions, and also respond to the submitted issues in an effective and active way. Another point which is similar to other documents is the emphasis on supervision by the people. Complaints and reports should be received, understood and the underlying situation checked. Through acquiring information through submissions, the service quality should be improved (State Council 2016).

This assessment of relevant content from documents of the central government regarding the requirements for online complaint platforms, interaction with the people and the role of these

²³ (阐明政策 chanming zhengce, 解疑释惑 jieyi shi hou, 化解矛盾 huajie maodun, 理顺情绪 lishun qingxu)

channels shows on the one hand the development of how the central government put forward opinions and regulations regarding open administration and government work with the people. On the other hand, it gets apparent that there has been a development of what is important for the central government about these platforms and how they should be facilitated. The different points and arguments can be said to be repetitive over the different documents, but more depth and details seem to appear over time when it comes to how the central government wants different agencies to handle the online submissions.

In order to generate a better overview of the different contents of these documents and in order to highlight the government guidelines regarding how to handle online submissions on government platforms, the following table will sum up the main findings and points that could be identified by assessing the government documents. It was attempted to group different arguments and requirements made within the documents into larger semantically related categories which are located on the left column of the below table, whereas on the right table, more detailed manifestations of these categories were outlined.

Table 5 Central Government Guidelines for Engaging with and Responding to the People (based on selected documents, 2001-2016)

Expectation	Manifestation/Details
Provide information	- Provide documents - Detail explanations - Clarify responsibilities - Reference information about policies
Handle problems	- Investigate and verify the issues - Solve issues - Answer to questions - Resolve conflicts and mediate - Work with other parties - Act in a lawful way - Inform if the submitted content is not clear enough - Respond timely - Respond in a meaningful way
Encourage participation	- For supervision of government work - For further input by the people - For monitoring public sentiment
Provide service	- Open and accessible service - Convenient channels for the public
Maintain a good relationship with the people	- Reduce doubts - Provide facts against rumors - Contribute to good government image and credibility - Straighten out emotions

4. Methodology

Within this part of the master thesis, the methodological approach which served as the basis for the qualitative content analysis of the random sample will be outlined. Due to the comprehensive explanation of the *Grounded Theory* approach offered by Strübing (2008), this will be the main reference for the first subchapter. Regarding the introduction of qualitative content analysis, Mayring's (2010) approach with its guidelines served as the main reference for the practical part.

4.1. Choosing a Method

After formulating the research interest and research question, it was clear that a qualitative approach should be chosen in order to analyze a sample of government responses to citizen appeals. The different analytical categories that were derived from the state of the art, and can be regarded as the deductive starting point for the analysis, were not sufficient for fully answering the research question which is targeted at more detailed categories in the form of repetitive patterns and ways the government responds to its citizens. Thus, an inductive-qualitative approach was regarded as most suitable for tackling the analysis of government responses and achieving meaningful findings which can be used to answer the research question and its sub-questions.

After conducting research on different approaches to qualitative research and possibilities to integrate an inductive way of analyzing textual data, it was found that the method of qualitative content analysis is useful to apply. Since there exist different ways of conducting content analysis, by comparing different styles and their suitability for different purposes, it was found that the summarizing inductive qualitative content analysis can be regarded as appropriate for the purpose of answering the research question. Convincing aspects which lead to choosing this method over other methods are the fact that it is combinable with the approach of *Grounded Theory* and thus can be said to be suitable for an inductive approach to qualitatively analyzing textual data, and the systematic way the analysis can be conducted.

Thus, it was decided to employ firstly *Grounded Theory* as the underlying approach when it comes to inductively identifying different patterns and manifestations in the form of categories of the firstly deductively defined categories. For practical guidance on how to conduct the analysis, the approach of summarizing inductive qualitative content analysis after Philipp Mayring

(2010) was chosen. These two underlying methodologically guiding techniques will be introduced in more detail in the following two subchapters.

4.2. Grounded Theory

Because this master thesis is aiming to contribute a new comprehensive framework for understanding which components constitute Chinese government responses to citizens' submissions, the *Grounded Theory* approach is one of the underlying methodological concepts. In order to give a brief summary, it is not primarily drawn on the primary source written by the founders of this approach, but a secondary source which is the book "Grounded Theory. About the socio-theoretical and epistemological foundation of the method of empirically based theory building"²⁴ written by Jörg Strübing (2008).

In 1968, Glaser et al. published their book "The Discovery of Grounded Theory. Strategies for Qualitative Research" which can be regarded as the founding manifesto of this research strategy (Glaser et al. 1968). The general understanding of approaches which claim to use *Grounded Theory* is, that theoretical assumptions are derived from empirical data. To be more specific, *Grounded Theory* can be said to be a certain style of research, which has the characteristic that theories grounded in empirical data are elaborated (Strübing 2008: 13f). It is important to note that there exists the misconception that *Grounded Theory* means that it is already enough to only paraphrase empirical data and create a theory based on these findings. In fact, *Grounded Theory* is based on a "specific conception of reality which overcomes the common dichotomy between objectivity and subjectivity and redefines the relationship between actor and surrounding" (ibid.: 8). After Strauss' conceptualization, it is emphasized that the different research stages of collecting the data, analyzing it and deriving a theory based on the analysis, are characterized by a "parallel timing and reciprocal functional dependence" (ibid.: 14). Additionally, it can be said that theory building does not mean that a research process has come to an end when the "building of a theory" has been achieved (ibid.: 14f).

Important aspects of working with the *Grounded Theory* approach shall now be introduced briefly. Aspects which can be considered redundant because the following subchapter already covers them will be left out. The method of steady comparison is crucial when it comes to the application of this analytical approach. In order to develop categories which are derived from the material, it is necessary to contrast different passages within the textual data and categorize

²⁴ The title and other direct citations from this source were translated from German into English by the author

similar ones as the same category, while defining rules and limitations for them. This means that the process of comparing and contrasting is used to finally develop categories which can be applied for the coding process. The definition for the term “category” was adopted from Strübing (2008). A category is therefore a “theoretical concept which only develops its structural characteristic through comparative analysis of the empirical phenomenon which represents the corresponding concept” (Strübing 2008: 18f). The coding process of the *Grounded Theory* can be broken down into different coding styles, namely open coding, which serves the elaboration of different phenomena within the material; axial coding, which targets relations between concepts; and selective coding, which focuses on integrating theoretical concepts to the identified “core-categories” which are normally few in number (ibid.: 19f). The applied approach has similarities with these coding steps but follows the methodological guidelines of the later introduced “summarizing inductive qualitative content analysis” after Mayring (2010).

The important aspect for the analysis of this master thesis is that the material was constantly compared and systematized to generate and improve the framework. By coding the data, different phenomena and categories were identified from the material and it became possible to reduce and integrate data into core categories and gain information relevant to the priorly formulated research question. Since the applied methodological approach of qualitative content analysis includes inductive category building, it can be said to be related to the concept of *Grounded Theory*. Therefore, the concept was briefly introduced with regards to its underlying logic of working with data and deriving theoretical assumptions directly from it without only relying on already existing theoretical approaches. These general explanations of *Grounded Theory* as provided in this subchapter only provide a broad introduction to this approach with a focus on relevant aspects for the conducted analysis of this master thesis.

4.3. Qualitative Content Analysis

In the past, many scholars have attempted to define the term “content analysis” specifically, but in uniquely different ways. Since the methodological guidance for the conducted content analysis was taken from Philipp Mayring (2010), other definitions besides his will not be discussed in more detail within this thesis. Mayring’s (2010) approach is a social science related method of content analysis. He puts forward six main points in order to define the term and method in more detail.

Firstly, content analysis is focusing on communication which can, but not necessarily has to be textual material. Pictures, music, and film can also be the subject of content analysis. The focus of analysis is laid upon symbols which are being transmitted through the material. Secondly, the analyzed communication has to be captured in some way (e.g. written or recorded). Thirdly, content analysis is a systematic, and not random or hermeneutic form of interpretation. Fourthly, there are a set of rules which have to be followed when conducting content analysis. This procedure allows replicability and verifiability, which meets the condition of intersubjectivity in the academic practices of social sciences. Fifthly, the aspect of a theory-driven approach when conducting a content analysis can also be regarded as crucial. There should be a connection to already existing research, and the findings and focus should ideally be related to already existing theoretical assumptions. Lastly, Mayring (2010) emphasizes again on the communication aspect. The results of the analysis focus on further information about the communication process which has been analyzed. This means for example to draw conclusions about intentions or impacts of the analyzed communication. Content analysis in this sense could be also referred to as categorically driven text analysis (Mayring 2010: 11ff).

Due to these characteristics, using qualitative content analysis in order to find patterns and dimensions within government responses is regarded as suitable to further answer the research question and its sub-questions based on the results. The following techniques which describe how the analysis should be conducted, served as practical guidance. In order to systematize the research procedure, it was decided to draw on the “summarizing inductive qualitative content analysis” after Mayring (2010) for the analysis of the responses. The figure below²⁵ shows the different steps of this technique:

²⁵ (see also: Mayring 2010: 68)

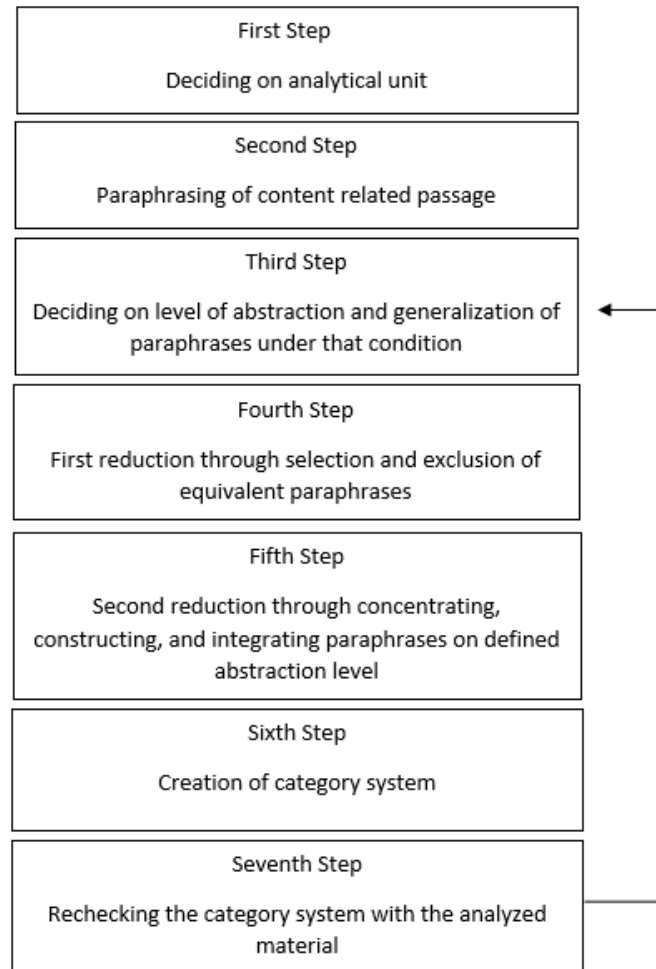


Figure 1: Summarizing Content Analysis

This procedure will be used to break responses down to their structural and semantic components as defined by the analytical scope. Due to the reason that the state of the art did not offer a sufficient theoretical framework that could be applied on the responses, the analysis for this thesis aims to be material driven. Since it is aimed to offer insights into patterns of government responses which are very closely related to existing phenomena, it was decided that inductive category generation is the best option. It is possible to combine this approach with the technique of summarizing content analysis because the paraphrasing and generalization steps are systematic ways to reach the goal of generating more abstract semantically connected categories which then can be compared throughout the coding process.

Due to this analysis process, it can be said to be in line with the principle of inductive category building which strives for a material driven depiction of the analyzed material. The introduced aspects of *Grounded Theory*, which was discussed in more detail in the previous subchapter, was applied methodologically for the inductive analysis. Still, the analysis followed the procedure of summarizing content analysis which means that the results could be generated in a

systematic way and it was possible to inductively detect conspicuities and generate a set of categories which were tested on their repetitiveness based on the principle of *Grounded Theory* (e.g. *ibid.*: 84).

To sum up the methodological approach which was used for the conducted analysis, the different steps of inductive category building can be described as a circular process starting off with the material, deciding on the abstraction level, going through the material, formulating categories, revising them and finalizing the process by going through the whole material with the final version of the coding guide. If necessary, adjustments were made and the just described analysis process was repeated. As a last step, interpretation and analysis became possible (*ibid.*). For the inductive category building, the method of constant comparison as put forward by the *Grounded Theory* approach was applied as well. The outcome of the conducted summarizing qualitative content analysis with inductive category building was a coding guide with corresponding passages, which also gives the opportunity to further discuss the results in a qualitative way. Moreover, it was also possible to show frequencies of different categories in a quantitative way. (e.g. *ibid.*: 85).

4.1. Data Introduction and Sampling

Within this chapter, the analyzed data will be introduced in more detail. The random sample of 100 responses taken from the dataset which was made available through the research project “The Microfoundations of Authoritarian Responsiveness” by Prof. Christian Göbel (Christian Göbel 2015) covers government responses from the years 2006-2018 and from 25 out of 34 provincial-level administrative units. No bias has been given to limit the time or location from where the data was taken in order to facilitate that findings and statements about government responsiveness can be applicable for a large time period and across regions, which makes them more generally capturing the contents of government responses in China.

Because this analysis attempted to get insight into different ways the government responds to citizens on these platforms, it was decided to use a random sample consisting of 100 submissions and responses that has been generated from the collected online submissions which was made possible by the above introduced research project “The Microfoundations of Authoritarian Responsiveness”. It was decided to exclude posts which were discussed on forums, and only submissions which received one response were considered when analyzing the responses.

The sample size of 100 responses has been chosen due to feasibility reasons in order to conduct the analysis within the limited time frame available for writing this master thesis. Additionally, the approach of theoretical sampling was applied which is related to *Grounded Theory*. It highly emphasizes the relevance of the focus on theoretical understanding when it comes to determining the sample, and not focus too much on the size. The criterium of theoretical saturation is central when it comes to this approach. Theoretical saturation means that if no new insights and understanding can be gained from analyzed data, no more new data needs to be collected (e.g. Bryman 2012: 419f). It was found that after analyzing 100 responses, most of the categories were highly repetitive which means that it was possible to analyze also new data with the coding guide generated without having to add new categories or subcategories. Thus, it can be said that theoretical saturation was largely achieved.

The following graphs and tables will give more descriptive information about the analyzed sample regarding the regional distribution and the year the responses were written in:

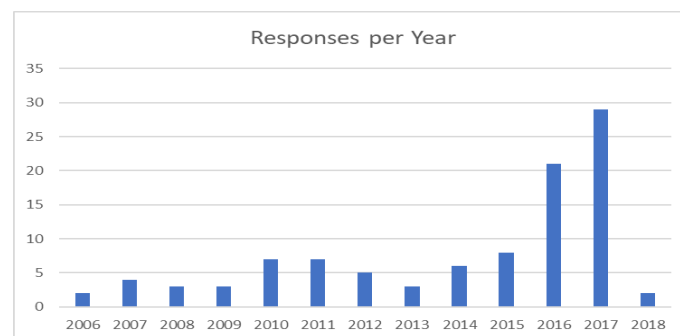


Figure 2 Responses per Year (Source: Dataset)

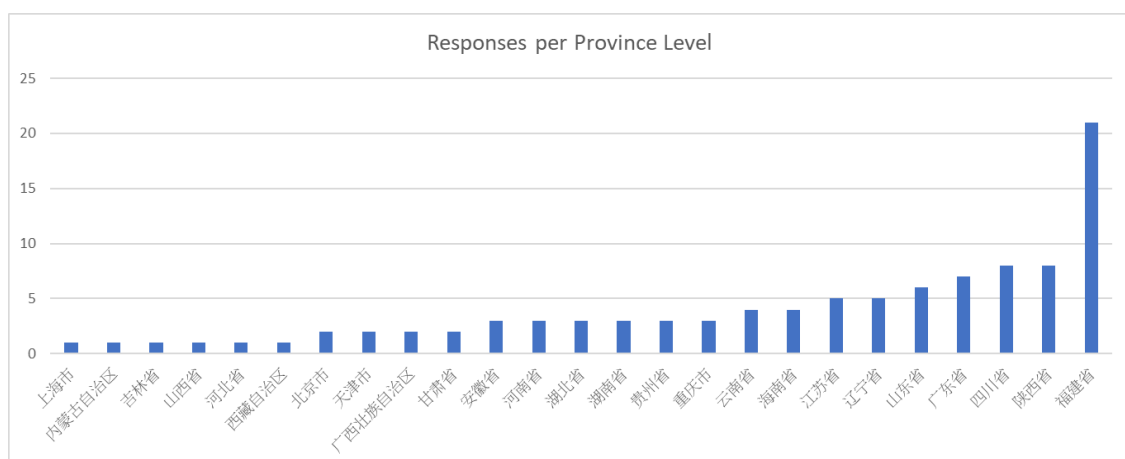


Figure 3 Responses per Province Level - Regional Sample Distribution²⁶ (Source: Dataset)

²⁶ From left to right: Shanghai, Inner Mongolia, Jilin, Shanxi, Hebei, Tibet, Beijing, Tianjin, Guangxi, Gansu, Anhui, Henan, Hubei, Hunan, Guizhou, Chongqing, Yunnan, Hainan, Jiangsu, Liaoning, Shandong, Guangxi, Sichuan, Shaanxi, Fujian

As it gets apparent from the figures above, there exists some overrepresentation of responses from the more recent years 2015-2018. For later integration into the outlined government guidelines, this means that it is possible to relate the findings generated from the random sample to the majority of stated requirements towards the online complaint platforms that were identified when assessing the relevant contents of the selected central government documents. It has to be taken into account that there exists also a geographical bias as the random sample features a high share of responses written in the province Fujian.

5. Analysis

This part of the master thesis illustrates in a first step the research process and the practical application of the outlined methodological approach. Secondly, the coding guide with the different inductively-deductively found categories and the corresponding inductively identified subcategories will be introduced, discussed and exemplified. In the last part of this section, the findings will be summed up qualitatively and quantitatively.

5.1 Research Process

Before the results of the analysis will be presented, this section provides a short overview about how the research process which was conducted in line with the priorly outlined methodological approaches looked like. The random sample of 100 responses was studied by the author and different reoccurring patterns which could be related to the predefined categories were identified. Since the process of qualitatively analyzing the textual data can be regarded as a circular process, it had to be gradually adjusted as new insights into the material were gained. That means that for example after covering ~20% of the material, the so-far created coding guide had to be reviewed, the definitions of certain categories adjusted, some categories had to be separated or combined and the whole material had to be re-assessed with the changed definitions and categories. The whole sample was approached in this manner, whereas it has to be noted that the more responses had already been analyzed, the fewer changes needed to be made as the results were moving closer to theoretical saturation with the quantity of analyzed data.

Because validity and reliability of qualitative analyses are important criteria. Thus, the following measures have been employed to meet these two criteria and make the study more valid and reliable. Due to different reasons, e.g. the availability of resources and opportunities, some measures which were suggested by consulted sources could not be employed. In order to improve the qualitative validity²⁷, it was attempted to describe the findings in a rich way in order to add as much information as possible about how the different categories were found. This has the effect of improving the understanding of the perspective taken by the author when analyzing the data. During analysis, the author tried to be aware of personal biases and developing a consciousness about how personal factors could interfere with the research outcomes. Another method employed was peer debriefing, which refers to the consultation of different team

²⁷ “Qualitative validity means that the researcher checks for the accuracy of the findings by employing certain procedures” (Creswell 2014: 201)

members of the research projects who reviewed parts of the coding guide at different stages, engaged in discussions and helped to clarify doubtful cases of category assignment²⁸. Reliability was attempted to be improved by constantly cross-checking the coded data with the developed coding guide, making adjustments when contradictions were found and taking notes during the process of data analysis²⁹ (e.g. Creswell 2014: 201).

Lastly, in order to give an example about how the methodological guidelines of the summarizing content analysis were implemented into the research process, the following example of a fully coded response will illustrate the used techniques.

Table 6 Coding Example

Response 65

网友，您好。对于人民网网友留言，我省依托《江苏省省委书记省长信箱处理系统》进行办理和回复，系统自动发送手机短信让留言网友及时了解办理情况。根据国务院《信访条例》规定，按照“属地管理、分级负责”原则，您的留言已及时转送相关部门办理。感谢您对我们工作的支持和理解。

Translation

Paraphrase	Generalisation	Reduction
Hello netizen	Hello	E7 Greeting
Regarding the message you left on “Renminribao online”, our province conducted the handling and response	Our province handled your submission	S1 Structure M5na Handling
according to the “handling system for the chief secretary’s mailbox of the Jiangsu Province Provincial Party committee”.	according to the handling system of our province	A1 Regulations and Laws
The system automatically sends out an SMS and makes the netizen timely understand the situation of how the issue is handled.	It automatically sends a message to inform the submitter about the handling of the situation	I4 Explanation
According to the State Council’s “Regulations on Petition”	According to regulations	A1 Regulations and Laws
and according to the principle of “dependent management and classified responsibility”	And principles	A3 Party Principles
your letter has already been forwarded to the related department for handling	your letter was forwarded to the related department.	M8pa Transfer to another department
Thank you for your support and understanding for our work!	Thank you for your support and understanding!	E2 Gratitude

²⁸ More information about qualitative validity can be found at Creswell 2014: 201f

²⁹ More information about qualitative reliability can be found at Creswell 2014: 201f

By using different colors, the identified semantically connected patterns and parts were distinguished within the original text. The respective parts were then paraphrased, after which they were generalized and in a last step reduced to the final subcategory the respective part got assigned.

5.2. The Coding Guide

Throughout the research process the final coding guide³⁰ consisting of six different categories with a total of 26 subcategories could be finalized. This was conducted according to the underlying methodological approach of *Grounded Theory* and the different steps of the summarizing content analysis by Mayring (2010). The results will be presented and discussed in the following subchapters. Each category and subcategory will be introduced one after the other and will be defined and exemplified. Selected parts of interest regarding Chinese political, cultural or societal peculiarities will be briefly contextualized and explained. In order to give an idea of the structure of the coding guide, the following scheme illustrates how the hierarchical system of categories and subcategories looks like:

Table 7 Coding Guide Scheme

Category A			
Subcategory	Definition	Example	Coding Rules
Subcategory A1	Definition of Subcategory 1	Example from the dataset which was coded as Subcategory 1	Rules in order to code a textual part as Subcategory 1
Subcategory A2	...	...	...
Category B			
Subcategory	Definition	Example	Coding Rules
Subcategory B1	Definition of Subcategory 1	Example from the dataset which was coded as Subcategory 1	Rules in order to code a textual part as Subcategory 1
Subcategory B2	...	...	...

³⁰ The full coding guide can be found under Appendix 1

5.2.1. Structure Category

The first category which will be introduced is the so called “Structure Category”. It only includes the subcategory “S1 Structure”. The category itself is the only one that has been found inductively and thus is not theoretically derived from the state of the art. It was created because many textual features of the responses were found to solely have a structuring purpose and included rather redundant content which nevertheless make the response more reader-friendly and easier to navigate, especially when it comes to longer responses. To define this category, only text which was non-content related and served the purpose of structuring the response into different sections were chosen to be coded under this category.

Even though the content of is not important, structuring elements can be a sign of a more formal and reader-friendly way of responding to citizens. Also, it has been found that some responses feature parts which repeat the core content of the submission and refer back to it. This can be seen as an additional acknowledgement and confirmation of understanding of the content submitted by the citizen. Furthermore, especially responses to submissions which covered more than one topic can show by structuring it, that every part has been addressed, or at least which parts have been addressed.

The following examples will illustrate in what way structuring elements are used within government responses: “Honored netizen, hello! **Regarding your question, here is the answer:** [...]” (Response 6³¹). This example shows a structuring part of the response which can be said to serve the purpose of an introduction. Often, the problem gets cited in more detail by referring to the title of the submitted appeal or summarizing its content, as can be seen in this example: “Hello Netizen! **Regarding your question about the non-public lowest scores of the first interview round** [...]” (Response 8). By adding this part to the response, the responding agency reconfirms the content of the submission which received the response. In some cases where submissions addressed more than one issue or question, the responses often introduced and structured the answers by bits in a similar manner to the example given in Response 8, which allows better readability. Another kind of structuring has been found at the end of responses where the responding department’s name is given as some sort of end signature: “[...] **Reply**

³¹ The analyzed responses have a reference number which can be found within the additional Excel data file that contains the random sample. This file also contains the source link and further information about the responding department, the region and the year.

by Xuanhan County Culture, Radio, Film, Television, Press and Publication Copyright Bureau” (Response 10).

Structuring elements have been found in about 50%³² of the analyzed responses. They give the response a certain level of formality, structure, and better readability for the recipient. Also, it can be said that a lot of phrases used within parts that were coded as *S1 Structure* could be found with exactly the same wording or at least in a very similar form in different responses across the whole analyzed dataset. This could imply that there has been a development of some sort of etiquette regarding the way of how to respond and what wording to use when structuring a response.

5.2.2. Measure Category

The measure category has been identified within the state-of-the-art literature in Cai and Zhou’s (2019) article. The two relevant category examples within their paper for the derivation of the measure category are “being processed” and “promising to resolve”. These categories were summed up as the *Measure Category*. This category includes inductively identified subcategories which refer to parts within government responses that describe actions and measures relating to how a submitted case within the citizen appeal was, is or will be handled. In other words, the *Measure Category* contains measures in the form of an action which is claimed to be undertaken by any actor³³. Promising to resolve an issue was considered under the *Measure Category* too, because subcategories which describe measures could be related to a description of how an issue is promised to be resolved.

To further differentiate who has undertaken a certain action, the letters *a* and *b* will be used to refer to the acting party. In that sense, *a* is referring to the responding department as being the actor, *b* refers to another actor who has undertaken a measure. Since measures are actions, they also have an inherent time dimension with regards to when they were, are or will be taken. Thus, the identified measures were additionally coded with the time aspects **p**ast, **n**ow and **f**uture depending on when the measure was, is or will be taken. The abbreviated label used for each subcategory of the *Measure Category* is **Mx+p/n/f+a/b**. If it is not clear whether a measure has

³² Exact numbers and quantitative comparisons will be provided in a later chapter which will summarize the findings in a quantitative way

³³ This means that also other actors than the responding department were considered if it was described that they were, are or will be taking certain actions in the form of measures

already been taken, it was coded with *future*. Only if it was clear from the context that a measure has been taken, it was coded with *past*.

Since the *Measure Category* is rather complex due to the time and actor aspect, within this master thesis it is not possible to give a distinct example for each possible peculiarity. Also, when it comes to the quantitative analysis, due to the complexity of combinations of different aspects like time, measure type and actor, it was not possible to quantitatively capture and display the distribution of more detailed measure categories broken down into different combinations of their peculiarities.

5.2.2.1. Delegation

The measure subcategory *M1 Delegation* in the coding guide refers to parts of a response which describe a delegation of a task or a measure that is, was or will be delegated, in other words assigned, to another actor³⁴. Every part of a response that shows initiated contact with another actor with the purpose of delegating a task or measure was coded with this subcategory. Actions which were enforced on other actors or the measure of forwarding a submission to another department was coded with separate subcategories, and not together with *M1 Delegation*. It is important to note that the action which is, was or will be delegated was coded separately as the corresponding measure subcategory it could be identified as in order to avoid information loss about the delegated action. In the Chinese context of conflict resolution, the act of delegation has been described as problematic when an issue got transferred from one department to another. This was discussed for example by Minzner (2006) who described that petitions who get transferred to local agencies are often ignored which leads to less success of resolving them (Minzner 2006: 117). Within this analysis of government responses, the responding government agency did often not delegate the whole task to other actors and stopped being involved. It rather delegated tasks to other actors and still followed up on the handling process which got reported and described within the government responses as well. The phenomenon described by Minzner (2006) has more relevance for the measure related subcategory *M8 Transfer to Another Department*, which will be introduced later.

In order to exemplify which parts were coded with *M1 Delegation*, the following two examples will be used for further illustration:

³⁴ For example, another actor in this case could be another person, unit or department.

*“We received your problem and will answer it the following way: We found out that the unit which employs your husband already approached us with that issue. According to our regulations, our bureau has already finished the examination, but because of personnel changes on the city level we have not received the money for September which causes a delay in paying it out. **We recently started to contact the concerning administrative level to receive the money.** As soon as we receive the money, you will get it. We kindly ask you to show understanding for the inconvenience you had to go through. As discussed on the phone, due to the change of your husband’s working unit please bring the identity card, insurance card, after copying it and handing it over to the unit you will receive a one-time medical treatment subsidy. Thank you for your letter, you are welcome to supervise us, and we strive for enhancing our service quality to meet the masses’ expectations.” (Response 1)*

The highlighted part was coded with *M1na Delegation* because the responding department claims that it is currently asking another administrative level to give them the demanded money which can be regarded as a delegation of the task of sending the money to the relevant department.

*“Hello Netizen, regarding your matter, **we have entrusted the city’s fuel gas and heat supply department to conduct investigation, which they already did.** As a result of the transformation from coal boilers to gas heating, the natural gas pressure is not always stable, additionally your district is within the final stage of heat pipelines, factors like the installed facilities from the developer are not according to standards and impact the heating supply quality. [...]” (Response 14)*

Within the above response, it can be seen that the task of investigation of the situation has been delegated to another party, namely the city’s fuel gas and heat supply department. It is slightly different from the above example of a Delegation because in this scenario the act of delegating a task is much more apparent and direct than in Response 1. Furthermore, this response also reflects the phenomenon of a policy driven transition from coal to gas heating and has been described for example by Xu and Ge (2020) who investigated how satisfied citizens in an area affected by this policy were with the transition. The policy was introduced to improve the air quality and reduce pollution. As can be seen in the above response, the implementation of this policy seemed to have caused problems and instabilities regarding the heating quality have been reported to one of the online complaint platforms.

The subcategory *M1 Delegation* which could be found in about 20% of the coded sample that included 100 responses illustrates how the platforms receiving complaints, requests and suggestions are often not fully capable of solving issues or starting solution processes, but have to reach out and rely on different administrative levels and actors in order to progress and deal with an issue. It is quite interesting that in these delegation chains of actions and measures are transparently described within the responses. By looking at delegated tasks and involved actors, interesting insights into the receiving departments' capacity and range of actors a task can be delegated to can be gained. For example the delegation visible in Response 1 showed a dependence on a higher level government; and the delegation in Response 14 showed that the responding agency worked together with the fuel gas and heat supply department in order to provide a response to the citizen instead of fully entrusting it with dealing with and responding to the submission.

5.2.2.2. Examination

The next subcategory *M2 Examination* which can be regarded as the most frequent subcategory of the *Measure Category*, is the act of examining a situation. In order to code a part of a response as an examination, it has to describe a situation where a matter with relation to the submission is, was or will be examined by an actor. This can be done by either contacting another actor in the sense of inquiring about the situation or conducting an examination of the situation on the spot. This measure can be differentiated from *M1 Delegation*, which involves contact between two different actors as well, in the sense that *M2 Examination* is purely information based and serves the purpose of gaining further insights, whereas *M1 Delegation* involves contact with another actor as well, but for the purpose of assigning another task to them. The following examples shall illustrate how examinations look like in government responses:

“We already contacted the Zhan Jiang construction company (phone number). The responsible people expressed that the house is sellable, and the company will sign. Since the house is a social welfare house, the company is interested in purchasing it back. It is suggested that Mr. X should go to the company and quote a price and the company should accept, if not then the house can still be sold to someone else.” (Response 16)

The above example shows an examination example where another actor has been contacted by the responding government agency to gain more information about the situation whether an inherited house can be sold or not (Submission 16). The response was given based on the

information obtained from the construction company and the bold part was coded as *M2pa Examination*.

Another example that features *M2 Examination* is Response 18 which was written as a response to the reported problem of a person who keeps poultry at home which caused bad smell for neighboring residents (Submission 18). In the below scenario, the examination manifested itself as the district's law enforcement team going directly on the spot to investigate the situation which is why the bold part was coded as *M2pa Examination*. However, according to the response, the stated problem from the submission could not be confirmed.

“Our district’s law enforcement team went already to that place and investigated, but there were no animals found.” (Response 18)

Examinations are referred to ~45% of the responding messages. This shows that the responding departments claim to pay attention to the submitted issue and conduct verification and investigation themselves, or state that other actors conducted investigation, in order to gain a better understanding of the situation. Another possible interpretation of the examination subcategory could be that it indicates a level of suspiciousness regarding the truthfulness of the content of the submission.

5.2.2.3. Contact with the submitter

If the responding department claims that there was, is or will be contact initiated with the submitter of a complaint, request or suggestion, the respective part was coded with *M3 Contact with Submitter*. Contact initiation can manifest itself for instance in the form of calling or communicating with the person face to face on the spot. For a part to be coded with this category, it is not necessary that the contact has been successfully initiated. The relevant aspect that will be identified is the claimed effort that has been put into contacting the person who submitted an appeal.

*“Hello, we received your letter and **after familiarizing with you about your situation**, this is our answer regarding medical insurance. At the moment, work regarding basic medical insurance is in progress. After our town has completed the work, you can go to the household registry department of the community labor workstation to address your matter. If you are a unit employee, you shall participate in the basic medical insurance for urban employees in the city in accordance with the ‘Provisional Measures for Basic Medical Insurance for Urban Employees in Xi'an’ (Municipal Issue [1999] No. 138),*

and enjoy the basic medical insurance benefits for urban employees in our city.” (Response 3)

Within this first example, the responding party describes the act of reaching out to the submitter of the appeal and claims that a familiarization with the request posted has taken place. That allowed the government agency to respond by giving advice. In this situation, the familiarization about a situation could have also been regarded as an examination. Thus, in the coding guide it had to be made clear that *M3 Contact with Submitter* overrules cases that could also be coded as *M2 Examination*.

A more subtle way which was also coded as *M3 Contact with Submitter* was a part of a response in which it was claimed that explanations were provided in person about the impact of box-type transformers:

*“[...] In the process of installing the box-type transformer, you have prevented the installation of the box-type transformer because of the radiation generated by it. The county housing security team, the power supply and other departments went to the scene with a plan to investigate. **They also explained to you many times** and took effective protective measures. [...]” (Response 30)*

The above case shows that the different actors who went on site had personal contact with the submitter by intervening on the spot and explaining the respective situation further. This serves as a good example for situations where not the primary responding party, but another actor reportedly interacted with the submitter to deal with raised concerns. Thus, the assigned code for the bold section was *M3pb Contact with Submitter*. This example also shows that the responding departments and relevant actors who are responsible to handle the reported situations engage with the problem beyond the online realm and intervene with direct contact to the citizen.

This last short example of a response illustrates documented attempted contact with the submitter by phone which in this case has been unsuccessful:

*“The information the submitter gave us was not sufficient. **When we called no one picked up.** Please send another message after verifying the related information.” (Response 68)*

As can be seen, the failed contact initiation with the submitter was argued to have prevented the responding party to respond in a more detailed way. Of course, it cannot be verified whether

the content submitted by the citizen was insufficiently detailed or whether the responding agency used this as an excuse to not provide a full answer.

Reported contact with the submitter can be regarded as a comparatively rarely coded category within the analyzed sample. However, it shows that the level of interaction with the government goes beyond the online complaint platforms and there is effort put into personally clarifying and talking about the reported topics from the side of the government. Thus, the online complaint platforms are only one channel where an interaction between the government and the people can happen. By having the responding actor reporting the whole procedure of handling a certain matter including the measure of contacting the submitter beyond the online complaint platform, also these otherwise hidden interactions, or at least a trace of them, become apparent.

5.2.2.4. Implementation

The name of this subcategory has been chosen with respect to the following definition of the verb “to implement”, which is: to make “[...] something start to happen that has been officially decided” (Cambridge University Press 2020a). As with several other subcategories, *M4 Implementation* corresponds with all actions described within a response that are claimed to have been, are or will be undertaken by any actor as a contribution or reaction to the submission’s content. What sets this subcategory apart from other measure subcategories is the tendency to represent more topically unique or case-specific actions and the characteristic of describing actions which were not covered under the other specific subcategories. When looking at this definition, also already finished actions which are case-specific and not just about to start were included in the coding rules of this subcategory, aligning with the temporary nature of all measure related subcategories. If there were described actions which did not relate to the response and served the purpose of background information, they were not coded as *M4 Implementation* but as a different, often information category related, subcategory. In order to further clarify what is regarded as an implementation within the coding guide, a few examples will be given below.

*“Hello! Our department has already passed a notification that the illegally constructed part **should be self-demolished**. We will continue to work on that according to law.”*
(Response 2)

This response refers to the action of tearing down a built part of an illegal construction which was referred to in the respective complaint submitted to the platform (Complaint 2). The action

of demolition can be considered as a measure, but it is too topic specific and thus surpasses the analytical scope which was chosen when creating the coding guide. As a result, it was coded as *M4fb Implementation* because the action has not happened yet which is indicated by the *f* that stands for future, and the responsible party for the future action is not the responding department, but another actor which is indicated by the *b*. The general topic of illegal constructions is a phenomenon in China which has been discussed for example from a legal perspective (Yang 2004; Wei and Sun 2011), and is apparent in rural China (Tang and Chung 2002), but also in areas which are currently in the process of urbanization (e.g. Wei and Sun 2011).

*“Hello, the enhancement of the safety management personnel’s knowledge and management capabilities about safety in production is a requirement which is set in the safety in production law and it is also important for the company’s good work regarding safety at production. **Recently the city security administration department organized an exam for the main staff of the production operation working unit and the safety in production managers** which was conducted by strictly following the requirements by law. **The question pool got revised, and the former standard of 60 points got changed to 80 points with the goal that the staff should enhance their knowledge about safety in production and also ensure the knowledge and management capabilities for the concerning working units.** To help the students to better grasp the knowledge and to improve the study efficiency, the city security administration department will in a next step entrust the related technology organization [...]” (Response 9)*

The first implementation, which is the first bold text section in the above example, was the organization of an exam conducted by the city security administration department which was coded as *M4pb Implementation*. The second bold text section which describes the revision of the question pool was coded with the same subcategory. The part following the core description of the action about the reasoning for the revision was coded together with the implementation part due to the semantic connection.

Implementations were found frequently within the coding guide, but it can be said that they are not coherent when it comes to their used vocabulary, topics and actions due to their specific characteristic of being unique and dependent to the respective topic. Still, they are an important part of government responses because they indicate the documentation of quite specific measures the department or other actors have taken with relation to the submission. By referring to implementations within government responses, it is shown that active work regarding a

certain raised issue is happening and it can be said to also have an assuring role towards the submitter that specific work is being done.

5.2.2.5. Handling

The subcategory *M5 Handling* was assigned to parts of a response which indicated that a problem is being, was or will be dealt with. Important for this category is that the respective part is not further specified, and it is just stated that something was, is or will be done without any clarification or specification. If the time aspect was not clear, it was assumed that the action or handling had not taken place yet. The following examples will be used to illustrate some parts which have been coded with this subcategory:

*“Hello, we received your letter and after familiarizing with your situation, this is our answer regarding medical insurance. **At the moment, work regarding basic medical insurance is in progress.** After our town has completed the work, you can go to the household registry department of the community labor workstation to address your matter. [...]” (Response 3)*

Within the above example, the exact actions regarding the basic medical insurance have not been further specified which is why it has been coded as *M5na Handling*. It has been assigned the attribute *n* since it was stated that work is currently in progress. By reporting that work is in progress, the submitter is reassured and informed about the current stage and can adjust the expectations regarding the work being done.

*“Hello netizen, we have already received your letter and **our township has already handled it.** Now we respond. On the 18th of November 2014 the township People’s government has arranged the Shuangqia town construction organization office to go on the spot and understand the actual circumstance. [...]” (Response 80)*

Response 80 illustrates that also parts implying an ambiguous action within responses, which offer further explanations of how the responding department has handled a certain situation, were coded as *M5pa Handling*.

It can be said that there were several different manifestations of this subcategory found within the analyzed sample. It was uncommon that it was stated that a situation was handled without further explanatory parts or more detailed measures. Still, this subcategory is among the more frequent measure subcategories found within the sample, about 30% of the responses featured at least one instance of *M5 Handling*. The information that something is, was or will be handled,

can be regarded as a reassuring statement that could serve the function of conveying the message that something is done about a certain issue without further specification. On the other hand, it can be said that if it is just stated that a situation has been handled, it is left unclear what exactly has been done and thus it provides less information than a response featuring well explained measures being taken. For further analysis using this coding guide, it should be noted that individual responses should be assessed as a whole, and by considering the corresponding submission to avoid misleading conclusions about the response quality. A major indicator for this category was the term “处理” (chuli) which means “to handle”.

5.2.2.6. Mediation

The definition of “to mediate” is, according to the Cambridge dictionary, “to talk to two separate people or groups involved in a disagreement to try to help them to agree or find a solution to their problems” (Cambridge University Press 2020b). Whenever a part indicated that some sort of mediation between different actors is, was or will be taking place, it was coded with the subcategory *M6 Mediation*. For the Chinese context, it must be additionally made clear that this practice has a long tradition in China and can still be regarded as a popular method of conflict resolution³⁵ (e.g. Huang 2006: 275). Mediation in the context of this coding guide means that the submitter has/had an issue with another actor and it could be observed within the response that the contacted department put effort into mediating between the submitter and the third party. When there is overlap, this subcategory overrules other measure subcategories which could be found within the mediation parts. To further illustrate this subcategory, the following examples were chosen and will be discussed below:

The first example shows how the town intervened and communicated with the submitter to solve the issues. This can be regarded as a mediation process, even though that part of the response did not contain the word “to mediate”, but the context allowed to code the bold section below as *M6pa Mediation*.

“We already gained understanding of the situation. The Jieji town government pays a lot of attention to the issues with migrant worker³⁶’s salary in Jieji town. Experts have

³⁵ More information about the process of mediation in China: e.g.: Huang (2006), Hu and Zeng (2015), Erpenstein (2017)

³⁶ China has a relatively high internal migration rate and it is quite common that people from rural areas decide to leave their homes to work in more developed areas which means for China to move to the coastal areas. These people are referred to as “migrant workers” or in Chinese “农民工” (nongmingong). They often have a difficult position and are regarded as second-class citizens (e.g. Lo 2017; International Labour Organization)

*also set up a leading group for dealing with migrant worker's salaries, **Jieji town also actively communicates with the appealers to coordinate and handle the matter** and actively takes relevant measures to deal with the matter. We investigated that the problem of delayed payment of the migrant worker's salary which was reflected by the submitter occurred because the items between the accounts of the developer and the construction company were not yet settled. Both sides are at the moment actively conducting the settlement of the debt [...]*" (Response 67)

In the above case, the mediation regarding payment of salary was conducted by the town government and between the migrant workers and the construction company. The situation has furthermore been examined and explained within the response to generate more understanding of the situation.

Within Response 77, it is described how the town government went on the construction site which was described in the complaint and coordinated with the masses. Thus, it can be said that the government officials intervened in a mediating way between the construction company and nearby residents. The bold part was coded as *M6pa Mediation*.

*"Hello, according to information of the township government and investigation on the spot, that road section is part of the city government engineering project and also there are indeed pile driver machines at the spot which affect the life of the masses around. At the moment, the town government cares a lot about it, **and they gathered at the construction site to coordinate with the masses**³⁷. On the spot was the construction company of Fuzhou city, it was expressed that it is avoided to work during lunch time and after 10pm to avoid disturbance of the life of the masses."* (Response 77)

Intervening and settling disputes in a mediating way can be seen as making use of a commonly used conflict resolution mechanism. Parts which were coded as mediation expressed the mediation process in a clear way, but of course it could also be argued that other measures taken by the responding actor which resolve a conflict between the submitter and any other actor could

³⁷ The term "masses", or in Chinese "群众" (qunzhong), is frequently used term that can be found within government responses. It is used to refer to the people and has an ideological character. The concept of the masses was introduced along with other concepts around the May Fourth Movement which took place between 1917 and 1921 (for more information about the May Fourth Movement, consult Encyclopaedia Britannica (2020). During the first half of the 20th century, it was impacted by views of crowd psychology on the one hand and its ideological usage found in historical materialism which relates to Marxism and communism. In the latter definition, the term holds a positive connotation as the masses are crucial for the success of the communist revolution. This usage of the term has been employed by the communist party (Li 2019) and thus it can be seen in written statements when political officials are referring to the people.

be regarded as some sort of mediation as well. As it was aimed to differentiate these actions based on the meaning of the text, it was decided to only code parts as *M6pa Mediation* which clearly referred to the act of mediation between conflict parties and it could be shown that the responding actor, or any other mediating actor, held a mediating role. This subcategory is rare as it was only found in 5% of the coded responses within the random sample.

5.2.2.7. Coordination

Parts which indicated that different departments or actors are, were or will be coordinated in order to work together on a task or a problem were coded as *M7 Coordination*. To put it differently, the coding criteria can be said to be that if any responsible actor was mentioned in a way that implies a shared work responsibility, the respective part was coded as *M7 Coordination*. Since shared work responsibility and working together on a task could in some scenarios also be understood as *M1 Delegation*, the following criteria were used to prevent an overlap of assigning these two categories. To code a part of a response as *M7 Coordination*, the task which is relevant for the coordination has to be assigned to at least two actors and the responding party can also be a part of the coordination. The following examples will illustrate different cases where parts were coded as *M7 Coordination*.

*“Hello, regarding your problem, the district government conducted implementation. **The district’s traffic and transportation bureau organized several times that the Qingrong Chengji Railway will be integrated in the Qingdao construction project department and the China railway number 3 group, other related units opened a coordination meeting regarding Anshun road.** Soon there will be a connecting road from Weishan community to Xianshan road, then the relevant facilities will be useable, and safety will be ensured.” (Response 23)*

Within this response, it can be seen that more than two actors have been coordinated to work on improving infrastructural matters regarding a road. Thus, the bold part was coded as *M7pa Coordination*. The indicator, which was crucial in the above example to code the relevant part as a coordination, was, that different departments were mentioned to have a coordinating meeting regarding the described matter.

*“[...] On the one hand, a special task force was set up to intervene immediately and mediate, and the bureau leaders led the team to the Zhangge community to learn about the situation. **Also, the matter was coordinated between the Shenzhen City Habitat***

Environment Committee, Longhua New District and other departments. The situation was timely reported to the Dongguan Municipal Party Committee and the Municipal Government to strive for support for the work. Together with the Municipal Party Committee and the Municipal government we went to Shenzhen to handle relevant matters. Through coordination of various levels and aspects, the two cities of Dongguan and Shenzhen have reached several consensuses. [...]” (Response 42)

Moreover, the above example shows the coordination of multiple actors in order to fulfill a task. Coordination being reported in that way within a government response gives an interesting insight into ties and connections between different handling actors within China and how they are coordinated and work together. It shows shared responsibilities and illustrates the efforts being put into coordinating matters among several actors in order to achieve a solution.

This subcategory shows how different departments and actors work together which gets reported within the government responses. Similar to the *M1 Delegation* subcategory, it shows which actors are getting involved in order to solve a problem or work on an issue. The difference for this subcategory is the fact that it is also possible that the responding government agency contributes with other actors together to the solution of a citizen appeal.

5.2.2.8. Transfer to Another Department

Since some departments receive submissions which lie outside their responsibility scope, reported cases of an active transfer of a submission to another department could be found in 8% of the coded sample. The coding criteria for this subcategory is, that it must be apparent from the response that the submission was or will be transferred to another department or agency which will deal with it. It is important to note that only parts which describe the transferring action as being conducted by the responding party were coded as *M8 Transfer to Another Department*. The act of transferring the message to another department can be related to the practice described by Minzner (2006) for petitions as it has already been discussed in the chapter where the *M1 Delegation* subcategory was introduced. It is argued that *M8 Transfer to Another Department* can be regarded as similar to a delegation, but more coherent with the description offered by Minzner (2006) of the often-applied action for petitions where they get transferred to another department (Minzner 2006: 117). This is because a delegation in the sense of the subcategory *M1 Delegation* refers to the delegation of single tasks which is mentioned within the government response whereas the responding party does not fully pass on the responsibility

of dealing with the issues stated in the submission, which differentiates *M1 Delegation* from *M8 Transfer to Another Department*.

Sometimes, responses which have parts that could be coded as *M8 Transfer to another Department* do mainly consist of this category because the responding department just informed the submitter that they cannot handle the matter themselves, but another department will:

“The problem reflected within your message has already been sent to Panghai town and Wanshui town for handling.” (Response 39)

The above response can be said to exist of nearly entirely giving the information to the submitter that the message has been transferred to another department. But this does not always have to be the case. Another example for the measure of transferring a submission to another department, but with more information offered by the responding department, is the following response:

*“Hello netizen, Regarding the message left on Renminribao online, our province conducted the handling and response according to the “handling system for the chief secretary’s mailbox of the Jiangsu Province Provincial Party committee”. The system automatically sends out an SMS on the phone and makes the netizen timely understand the situation of how the issue is handled. According to the State Council’s set “Regulations on Petition” and according to the principle of “dependent management and classified responsibility” **your letter has already been forwarded to the related department for handling.** Thank you for your support and understanding for our work!” (Response 65)*

Even though the complaint related to the above response did not receive a response to the problem of illegal land usage (Complaint 65), there was still more information provided about the process regarding the transfer of a submission than it was the case in Response 39. What Response 65 shows additionally are other components of the complaint system, in this case the usage of SMS in order to notify the citizen about the handling process.

The category *M8 Transfer to another department* shows how certain matters were received at agencies or departments which were not responsible for resolving or dealing with the submitted appeal. By transferring the message to the right place, further handling can potentially be enabled, and by responding to the submitter and still informing him or her that the matter has or will be transferred, it is implied that an answer can be expected from another department. It can be seen as reassuring that the matter has not just been denied and put on hold, but was actually transferred to a place that will probably take care of it. Additionally, it could be perceived as a

service provided by the government because there is not just a reference to the relevant department the matter should be addressed to, but the work of transferring the message has been already done by the responding agency instead of leaving it to the submitter to repost the appeal at a different place.

5.2.2.9. Enforcement

The final measure subcategory that will be introduced, is *M9 Enforcement*. Any part which contained content which was related to a claim that laws or actions were, are or will be enforced, was coded as *M9+p/n/f+a/b*. Indicators are if law is actively enforced by an actor, for instance by referring to handling situations according to law or with an implication of law; and enforcing measures onto other actors whereas the measure that got enforced was coded separately. This means that the legal or enforcing aspect has to be a part of the respective text section in order to be coded as *M9 Enforcement*.

The following examples shall illustrate how parts which were labelled as *M9 Enforcement* look like within responses:

*“Hello, thank you for your attention and support for the work of Fuzhou traffic management, this is our response. **The group of the administrative region has already increased the control density at that road,** opened up the path to the vehicles and brought under control the haphazardly parked cars and other law violating traffic related behavior. **From today on, we will continue to reinforce the effort to punish haphazardly parked vehicles at that road section and protect the order of that road section.** Thank you!”* (Response 69)

Within the above response, there could be found two examples of *M9 Enforcement*. The increasing of control density was coded as *M9pa Enforcement* because handling the situation by using staff to control the situation can be regarded as law related and measure enforcing. The same applies to the second highlighted part of this response, where punishment was mentioned in order to improve the parking situation on the road. As in the above examples the actions themselves can be regarded as law enforcement, the entire parts were coded as *M9 Enforcement* and not as a separate measure.

[...] Regarding your described problem, the Wancheng district committee pays a lot of attention. The party working committee was already sent to Zhongjing street to investigate and handle. Now we send back feedback regarding the concrete situation. The

*Huaniao market place has built steel roof sun sheds in order to shelter parts of the market without protection from water. It occupies space at the green area at Binhe Road. **The Zhongjin subdistrict office has already ordered** that it gets teared down by themselves.³⁸ [...] (Response 53)*

The bold part in Response 53 was at first not that obviously identified as *M9pb Enforcement* since it could have been interpreted as *M1 Delegation*, but because the subdistrict office officially gave an order to tear down illegally built sun sheds and such an order can be regarded as an enforcing action rather than a delegation, that part was assigned the subcategory *M9pb Enforcement*. Within the coding guide, it had to be ensured to outline the difference of the category *M9 Enforcement* and *M1 Delegation*. The difference between a delegation and an enforcement is, that if a measure is being enforced which gets apparent from the context and the wording used, it will be coded as an enforcement and not as a delegation even though to some extent it could also be regarded as a delegation of a task which another actor has to carry out.

Within Response 41, the following part was also coded as *M9 Enforcement*, even though it could also have been regarded as being an example for the category *M6 Mediation*:

*“[...] **They asked the manager of the shaokao³⁹ stall** to prevent too much loud noise, **if he can't prevent it, his venders booth will be shut down** [...]” (Response 41).*

The expressed demand of noise prevention towards the owner of the shaokao stall was regarded more as an enforcement than a mediation process. Also, the second bold part, where it is stated that the stall will be shut down if there is no compliance, supports that argument. Thus, it can be said that in similar situations, the category *M9 Enforcement* overrules *M6 Mediation*. Another interesting aspect is the content of noise pollution which got complained about in Complaint (41) which also got reflected within the response. Complaints in China about noise pollution are not rare and some studies have assessed complaints about different types of environmental pollution⁴⁰ reported by the citizens (e.g. Van Rooij 2010: 55, 60) and it has been found that predominantly complaints about air and noise pollution get reported by the citizens (Yang and Zhang 2011: 344).

³⁸ This response also illustrates an example of illegally set up building components which has already been discussed in the subchapter which introduces the subcategory *M4 Implementation*

³⁹ A shaokao stall, in Chinese 烧烤摊 (shaokao tan), is an eating place where customers can eat barbecued food. These eateries are quite commonly found in China

⁴⁰ Some examples for studies which have dealt with environmental pollution complaints in China are for example Van Rooij (2010), Yang and Zhang (2011), Dong et al. (2011) and Liu et al. (2017)

The category *M9 Enforcement* illustrates the power of government agencies in China. It is shown that unjust behavior can be handled by enforcing certain measures on actors that are showing behavior that is not in line with laws and regulations. By enforcing measures and rectifying situations according to laws and regulations which might trouble citizens, the rights of the people can be ensured and the government can take on the role of protecting the interests and rights of the submitter and other people affected by such reported behavior that requires rectification.

5.2.3. Outcome Category

The *Outcome Category* was derived from the state of the art studies conducted by Distelhorst and Hou (2017) and Cai and Zhou (2019), who referred to response categories with relation to an outcome in the sense of helpfulness and the provision of a resolution. In the sense of this master thesis, an outcome was understood as being related to a measure, which is why the *Outcome Category* only has the single subcategory *O1 Result*. Within the coding guide, the following definition was formulated as a guideline to code a part of a response as an outcome:

The subcategory *O1 Result* refers to outcomes of measures. The measure result was supplemented with a time aspect, either past or future and in some cases none, because the time aspect was not possible to be determined. Measures were prioritized over the *Outcome Category*, meaning that if a measure was the outcome of another measure, it was coded as the measure subcategory and not as *O1 Result* to retain information about measures. Exceptions were measures that did not relate to the issued complaint and only serve as an explanatory purpose. In order to be coded with *O1 Outcome*, the respective part had to relate to a measure that was, is or will be taken.

The following examples will illustrate different examples of parts which were coded with this category:

“Hello, regarding your issue, the city government conducted an investigation. According to the investigation, the counting method for that class and the class hour amount was measured. The numbers from the last 5 years were available, the held classes and times were officially confirmed and signed by the headmaster and the leading teachers. If you have further doubts, please put forward more detailed information about that situation and also leave your contact information so that our staff members can verify. Thank you for supporting our work.” (Response 11)

The underlined part of this response was coded as *M2pa Examination*, a subcategory from the *Measure Category*. The attributes *p* and *a* were added because the examination was conducted by the responding party. Since the following part can be regarded as the finding of the examination and thus the outcome of a measure, the bold text segment was coded as *O1p Result*, whereas the additional indicator *p* shows that the result can be related to a past event.

The next example will illustrate two already confirmed and achieved results which are part of a response to a complaint about insufficient heating supply, (Complaint 14) which has already been used as an example in the subchapter which introduced the delegation subcategory.

*“Hello Netizen, regarding your question, we have entrusted the city’s fuel gas and heat supply department to conduct investigation which they already did. **As a result of the transformation from coal boilers to gas heating⁴¹, the natural gas pressure is not always stable, additionally your district is within the final stage of heat pipelines, factors like the installed facilities from the developer are not according to standards impact the heating supply quality**. At the moment, the city natural gas company is already undertaking a lot of measures. **Within the concerning district, many consumers already have a room temperature that is according to standards**. Thank you for supporting our work.” (Response 14)*

Again, the underlined parts above highlight the measure and the bold parts the corresponding outcome. The first measure was coded as *M2pb Examination*, whereas the information provided directly after the examination has been achieved through the measure and was thus coded as *O1p Result*. The second measure was coded as *M5nb Handling* since the measures were not further specified. Already having achieved results regarding the heating standards can be seen as the direct outcome of these unspecific measures, which is why that part was coded as *O1p Result* as well.

The above examples illustrate how the government responses contain not only a record of different measures they were, are or will be undertaking, but they are also able to already include the results of undertaken measures. This style of responding reminds of a protocol that captures different steps and offers information about the achievements. Since this paper does not intend to evaluate the usefulness of an outcome or even claim that some of the responses have been resolved, the outcomes cannot be used as a quality indicator because their usefulness in order

⁴¹ The background information on the coal to gas transformation in China has already been discussed in the subchapter where the *M1 Delegation* subcategory was introduced

to solve the raised issue was not assessed. Nevertheless, in future research, the focus could also be laid upon these sorts of questions. Reported outcomes can still be regarded as an indicator for achievements through measures taken by different actors mentioned within the responses and show that responses are written at a point where there has been already put work into solving an issue which generates results. Of course, in cases where the outcome is said to be in the future, the former does not apply. These latter cases can be regarded as a prospect of future measure results.

5.2.4. Information Category

The next category that was derived from the state of the art is the *Information Category*. Cai and Zhou (2019), Grohs et al. (2016), Distelhorst and Hou (2017) and Chen et al. (2016) referred to response categories which included information in the sense of explanations, helpfulness or contact information which led to the derivation of the *Information Category*. Thus, parts and patterns of government responses which featured informational contents were put into information related subcategories. When analyzing the responses, informational content provided to the submitters has been identified and grouped into four different subcategories.

5.2.4.1. Contact Information

The first type of information, which was also found within the state-of-the-art literature, is *II Contact Information*. If the response contained any sort of contact information, the respective part was coded as that subcategory. An often-found example is the reference of a phone number:

*Hello, we have received your reflection of the situation. As you were not clear about any details of the situation of your residence, please directly turn to the National Land office and contact Mr. X with this **phone number *****. Thank you for your concern about the work of the National Land Office, your understanding and support! Shangzhuang Town, Yandu District January 28, 2014” (Response 81)*

This example shows that the contact information was given in order to give the submitter the opportunity to further engage with the government due to a lack of information about the issue. In order to further resolve the problem, the citizen can use the provided information to bring forward the concern again in person on the phone.

Another example of contact information given within a response was the number of a phone operator which is a number that directly links to a person, such as in the following response: “Already transferred to *** **operator** to handle” (Response 78). This example shows that the contact information might not have been given to the submitter, but could rather be regarded as an information relevant for tracing back the responsibility of who dealt with the submission, and thus could serve as a protocol of where the submission got transferred to.

Also, social media accounts of the government were considered as a contact information, as can be seen here:

*“Honored user, hello! Thank you for your support for our work and for your letter. Regarding your problem with the commercial usage of the residential building, we suggest you contact the city construction bureau (**phone number**) or another related department to deal with it, regarding your problem with the noise⁴², we suggest you turn to the environmental protection department (**phone number**) or a similar one to reflect our problem. Thank you for your support and supervision, if you have other doubts, suggestions or recommendations, please call us (**phone number**) or contact us on the **Hunmin city management WeChat**⁴³ account so we can respond. Our law enforcement personnel will go to the spot and handle the situation right away.”* (Response 20)

This response offers the contact information to other departments which should be able to help the person who submitted the complaint. There are multiple options provided for all the different aspects reflected by the submission. Another example is an address given to a citizen where they can turn to in order to complain about unpaid salary (Complaint 71): “[...] **the contact address is No. 14 Wanshou 2nd Road, Liuyi Middle Road, Taijiang District (next to Xingang Police Station) Tel: *****” (Response 71).

As could be seen, a variety of contact information was given under different circumstances with different backgrounds. By providing contact information, the submitter gets the opportunity to further engage with the responding department or other relevant government agencies which could provide further help. Thus, it can be said that providing contact information sometimes happens in the context of referring to a different agency that will be able to help the citizen better, which means responsibility is deferred. In other situations, it could rather serve the

⁴² The background information of noise pollution related complaints in China has already been discussed in the subchapter that introduced the *M9 Enforcement* subcategory

⁴³ WeChat is a social media app heavily used in China

purpose of having a complete protocol of handling procedures and enabling tracing back responsibilities.

5.2.4.2. Advice

The next informational subcategory that has been identified is advice given to the citizen. This term has been defined as content that advises the submitter how to take further action and thus take further self-reliant steps in order to solve the problem or handle an issue. The criteria for a text passage to be coded with this subcategory are, that the information has to imply further effort for the submitter and needs to contain detailed information about how to go about a described issue or question. It needs to be highlighted that just giving information about a responsible department was not considered as sufficient in order to code a passage with *I2 Advice*. Also, parts which encourage the citizen to further engage with a department were not considered as an advice in the context of this coding guide, but rather coded as *E3 Encouragement*.

This category will now be made clearer by exemplifying it:

*“Hello, we have received your question and it will now be answered. **Please come to the village committee⁴⁴ to issue a certificate. Make clear that it is your home, make clear the address of the house. Is conducting business permitted? If it is permitted, please bring your certificate and your ID to the industry and commerce place where business permits are handled. Thank you for your trust in our work”** (Response 7)*

This response to a request about how to open a business (Request 7) includes two examples of the *I2 Advice* category. It provides more detailed steps the citizen has to take and points out important aspects to consider when handling the situation without only referring to a place the citizen can turn to.

In some cases it was not that clear whether to code something as *I2 Advice*. In the case of the following response, even though the advice was not written in more detail within the response, the file attachment was still coded as *I2 Advice* because it can be assumed that relevant information regarding further steps could be found in the file:

⁴⁴ A village committee, within the response referred to as 村委会 (cunweihui) which is the abbreviation of 村民委员会 (cunmin weiyuanhui), is a committee that serves the purpose of self-governance in villages. According to article two of the Organic Law of the Village Committees of the People's Republic of China, it has the task to manage public affairs and welfare matters of the village, engage in mediation among villagers, maintain the public order and put forward villagers' opinions, requests and suggestions to the people's government. (Standing Committee of the NPC 2010)

*“Hello complainant! **An owner’s committee can be set up** according to the workflow of the first meeting of the owners’ meeting (see attachment). **First-time owners meeting meeting workflow.doc**” (Response 82)*

The above response mentions a so-called “Owner’s Committee”, which has the function of representing the interest of the home owners in China “[...] by supervising the service quality of the realty management companies as well as acting on the owners’ behalf [...]” (Qu 2016: 238f) when it comes to disagreements between the home owners and the realty managements. The existence of these committees has been discussed in the literature and for more information, Read (2003), Wang et al. (2012) or Qu (2016) can be consulted.

It can be seen that advice is given within government responses in various ways, but they all share the above outlined characteristics which is why they could be subsumed under the shared subcategory *I2 Advice*. The parts which were coded as *I2 Advice* often provided insights into day to day bureaucratic government procedures citizens can utilize in order to resolve certain issues. The information given to the citizens was tailored to the needs expressed within the submission and gives guidance for how to go about a certain issue. This can be regarded as a service provided to the citizens that also gives insight into how to engage with bureaucratic agencies and what requirements there are to make use of certain services.

5.2.4.3. Responsibility Information

The next informational subcategory is *I3 Responsibility Information*. Every part of a response that contained the name of a department or responsible actor with relevance for the described concern by the citizen, and parts which did not contain any further specified information or instruction for the citizen got assigned this subcategory. It could be regarded as closely related to *I2 Advice*. Cases which seemed unclear were differentiated by providing clear definitions. The distinguishing aspect from *I2 Advice* in cases where citizens are “advised” to turn to another department is, that when a part was coded as *I3 Responsibility Information*, no further information about any procedure was given. Thus, it can be said that the informational content could be regarded as less tailored to the submitted problem, assuming that the submission’s content demands to provide further steps and information.

The subcategory will now be illustrated with a few examples found in the dataset.

“Work related to smoke control is only dealt with by the health department, please turn to the city health department for handling” (Response 17)

In this case, the whole response was coded as *I3 Responsibility information*. The reasoning for why the part “please turn to the city health department for handling” (Response 17) was not separately coded as *I2 Advice* is, that no further information about how to handle the issue when turning to the health department was given. In the above example, the responding agency did not provide any other information, but stated that it is not responsible to respond to the topic of smoke control.

*“Regarding the problem reflected in the complaint nr. 350 regarding Nanyu Town of Shunhua Wulongjiang district, falsely propagating of free land”, The Nanyu industry and commerce law enforcement personnel has conducted investigation and gained understanding based on the issue the complainant has reported. **The problem about “quality”, does not fall under the responsibility of the industry and commerce department to oversee and handle it.** According to the “Regulations for supervision of the operation of the city’s real estate development”, **the real estate development department should handle it.** [...]” (Response 21)*

The above response outlines how the responding party highlights that the addressed issue does not fall under their responsibility. Additionally, the responsible department is named without further specifying how it should be approached. Since there is no more detailed information given, the bold part was coded as *I3 Responsibility Information*.

The category *I3 Responsibility Information* can be found in 18% of the analyzed government responses. By referring to other agencies and departments that are responsible for certain issues, it can be seen that the responding actors might not have the required competence to deal with the issue. By referring to places that can handle a certain issue it gets apparent that sometimes problems do not get submitted at the right place which still has to respond and point out what the right actor in order to address the issue is. Thus, responsibilities are being made clearer and the submitter gets the information about which departments handle what kind of matters. However, it can be argued that by featuring such a part within the response, the citizen does not get direct help or information provided for the submitted issue, unless the content was only asking for responsibility information.

5.2.4.4. Explanation

The most frequently found informational subcategory which was present in about 40% of the analyzed responses was *I4 Explanation*. Within the coding guide, the characteristics for a part

to be coded as *I4 Explanation* are that they have to provide information about why a problem exists, or to put it differently, provide background information regarding a certain circumstance. As it has been found that sometimes parts of the category *O1 Result* could also be coded as *I4 Explanation*, it is important to differentiate these two subcategories by definition. The rule was formulated that if background information without a preceding measure was given, the respective part was coded as *I4 Explanation*. Otherwise, the content was coded as *O1 Result*. This could be applied because if relevant measures were found within a response, they were always coded separately and not as an outcome, even if they happened to be the result of another measure.

Since explanations within government responses are topic specific and thus diverse and often lengthy, only a few shorter examples will be used to exemplify this category.

*“Hello, your message was received by liuyan.people.com and by the CPC county secretary, this is our answer. **The market was planned under local government leadership with the cooperation of different departments.** After the planning regarding vendor’s stalls and progressive refinery, an opening date will be chosen. Thank you for your letter, we wish you a happy life, safety and health for your family” (Response 4)*

The above response gives background information about who was involved in planning the market which can be regarded as background information and was thus coded as *I4 Explanation*. The responding actor gave this information without claiming to have conducted any examination or investigation, which is why it can be considered as an explanation containing information that was assumingly already available to the responding actor.

*“Hello! According to our country’s census registry administration system, **citizens can only change main information with proof.** Please go to the census registry local police station for dealing with it.” (Response 22)*

This response was given to a request which asked about information regarding how to change the birth year within documents (Request 22). Since the responding department offered an explanation about the situation regarding the change of main information within documents, the bold part was coded as *I4 Explanation*.

From the above examples, it can be seen that explanations are very specific, appeal related and provide further informational content in order for the citizen to understand the situation and background information regarding the raised issue better. The explanation category can be regarded as one of the most informative categories since it serves the purpose of deepening the

understanding of the citizens. Also, it was often found to be used in the context of a clarification regarding raised concern by the submitter.

5.2.5. Argumentation and Justification Category

The *Argumentation and Justification Category* has been derived from the studies of Cai and Zhou (2019) based on their category “justification or explanation of an existing practice” and the category “Deferral”, which refers to cases where it is argued that due to a lack of information, no response can be given, that can be found at Chen et al. (2016). Subcategories that fall under this category can thus be said to be defined as containing argumentative and justifying content which could be used to convincingly back up an argument. It has to be differentiated from the Information Category which includes subcategories that provide for example background information about an issue or explanations. These aspects could be argued to have argumentative character as well, but were differentiated within this thesis. Examples for argumentation and justification related contents are for example the citation of laws in order to back an argument and thus justify certain practices, or even the reference to party principles defined by the Communist Party of China. The following introduced subcategories will further illustrate what was found to be a part of this category type.

5.2.5.1. Regulations and Laws

The first subcategory that was found to be used frequently within responses is the reference of regulations and laws in order to back up explanations of a background situation and justify certain procedures. Thus, the subcategory *A1 Regulations and Laws* has been created. Parts which contain any reference of laws, regulations or guidelines got assigned A1 Regulations and Laws. The minimal conditions are that there has to be either a citation of or a reference to regulations, laws; or lawful behavior, which makes the main criterium, that everything that belongs content wise to regulations and laws will fall under this subcategory. Since laws and regulations could also fall under the subcategory *I4 Explanation*, it was decided that *A1 Regulations and Laws* should overrule this subcategory in order to capture references with legal content and reduce information loss.

An example for this category can be found in the following response:

“Hello Mr. X, your letter to the “Chairman’s Leadership Mailbox” has been transferred to our department. Now we respond as follows: The 2015 mid-term entrance

examination registration policy has been issued. The document is called “notice on doing a good job in enrollment for senior middle schools in Shanghai Secondary Schools in 2015” (Shanghai Education Commission Foundation [2014] No. 92). That document stipulates the conditions for eight types of non-local registered students to participate in the city. [...]” (Response 32)

The bold part which refers to the document that contains information about school enrollment in Shanghai was coded as *A1 Regulations and Laws*, whereas the underlined part was coded as *I4 Explanation*. It can be seen that the reference to a regulation could appear within, or as a part of an explanation in order to further back up and justify it with a legal background.

The next response to a stated problem of school enrollment also illustrates an explanation that has been highlighted by underlining and has been backed up with the reference of a regulation:

*“Mr. X called about a problem with a kid entering school in Xintiandi District. **According to the Duyun city’s plan regarding compulsory education school enrollment work, students who enter junior high school have to enter school in line with the related conditions of the community subdivision plan.** Mr. X only needs to bring the related documents to the city’s education office and after the examination of basic education branch, entering school can immediately be handled.”* (Response 73)

The full name of the referred document has not been cited, but only referred to. It can be seen how the reference to the city plan gets used as a basis in order to give practical advice for the submitter on how to enroll their kid to school. By doing so, the submitter does not need to consult the document themselves, but receives the already condensed information based on the regulation for the stated problem within the submission.

The following examples show how certain actions and measures were justified with a legal argument.

*“Hello! Our department has already passed a notification that the illegally constructed part should be teared down. We will continue to work on that **according to law.**”* (Response 33)

Response 33 shows the claim of working on the removal of an illegally constructed building⁴⁵ part which has been coded as *M5fa Handling*. It is further argued to happen according to law,

⁴⁵ The issue of illegal construction in China has already been discussed in the subchapter which introduced the implementation subcategory

in Chinese 依法 (yifa). Thus, it can be said that in this example it is not only stated that the government will do work regarding the issue of illegally constructing building parts, but also that it will be done according to law, which backs the measure up legally and expresses a lawful handling of the situation.

A similar example is Response 55, which also addresses a complaint related to the issue of illegal construction:

*“Hello netizen! We have received your complaint regarding illegally constructed and opened restaurant which is noisy and disturbs the life of residents around it, it is located at the Nangang Road opposite to the national taxation bureau. Our leaders pay a lot of attention to it. We gave the task of examination to the city administration group. This is our answer: Our law enforcement personnel went the spot to inspect it and visited the surrounding residents, there appear to be no new illegal constructions, the by you described illegal construction and noise seem to be a past problem. After the examination, our office handled everything **according to law.** [...]” (Response 55)*

This response to a complaint regarding an illegal building and noise (Complaint 55) also argues that work was done according to law, even though the respondent claims that there was no illegal building found. The underlined part was coded as *M5pa Handling* whereas the following bold part was coded as *A1 Regulations and Laws*.

When looking at different parts that have been coded as *A1 Regulations and Laws*, it can be said that they provide legal arguments and guidelines about how to handle certain issues raised within the citizen appeal. On the other hand, they can be seen as used for making explanations more valid and locating them in the official legal sphere, which makes the validity of the action less arguable. Furthermore, it can also be argued to be used sometimes as a reassuring argument for the recipient in order to make the action more valid and less questionable because legal standards are used which provide the framework of actions taken by departments within China. This subcategory shows how laws and regulations play an important role as they are referred to in nearly 30% of the responses that have been analyzed, which gives them a more formal and legitimate tone. It also shows how different measures and actions are getting justified by law that were claimed to have been, are or will be taken in response to the submitted appeals by citizens.

5.2.5.2. Lack of Information

The next identified subcategory A2 Lack of Information covers text segments which express that the respondent has found that there has been a lack of information within the submitted appeal by the citizen. This means that if it is claimed that there is further information needed in order to handle the submission, the respective part will be coded as A2 Lack of Information. Additionally, text parts which express doubts which demand more clarification by the submitter will also be coded with that category. This category has not been found that often within the coded sample. The following examples will illustrate different manifestations of this phenomenon.

“Your complaint question is too vague. It is not the appropriate basis for the department to conduct investigation. We suggest that you issue a new complaint as a concrete and accurate message. Thank you for your trust!” (Response 36)

The above example shows a very direct form of voicing that the information provided by the submitter was not sufficient, and thus no investigation could be conducted. The responding actor is not shutting down the communication with the submitter, but encouraging him or her to resubmit the appeal. Also, the reason for the short response got provided to the citizen. This could encourage the citizen to re-engage with the online complaint platform. Of course, it cannot be answered whether the information provided by the citizen was objectively insufficient for the respondent to provide a more informative answer.

Another possible manifestation of the subcategory A2 Lack of Information can be seen in the following example:

*“Hello, regarding your problem, the city government conducted investigation. According to our investigation, the counting method for that class and the class hour amount was measured. The numbers from the last 5 years were available, the held classes and times were officially confirmed and signed by the headmaster and the leading teachers. If you have further doubts, **please put forward more detailed information about that situation and also leave your contact information,** so that our staff members can check. Thank you for supporting our work” (Response 11)*

Even though the appeal was already dealt with by conducting investigation, which can be seen when looking at the first underlined text part that has been coded as M2pa Examination, within the bold part there can be seen an implication for the subcategory A2 Lack of Information. By

pointing out that more detailed information can be put forward, and doing so can lead to further investigation which is highlighted by underlining the following text segment, it can be assumed that the provided information was only sufficient for the already conducted investigation and that it would be possible to handle the issue in more depth after receiving more information. In this case, it could have also been possible to code the bold part with the *E3 Encouragement* subcategory which will be introduced later, but due to the context, it was decided to code it as *A2 Lack of Information*.

This last example is a more subtle case of the *A2 Lack of Information* subcategory:

*“[...] Regarding your question concerning the point difference, **what you described seemed to concern the music teacher position**. We promptly checked this with the music department and found that [...] (Response 8)”*

By using the word “推断” (tuiduan), which can be translated as “to infer” and was more freely translated as “seemed”, it is implied that the information given within the submission is not accurate enough to be fully sure about the concrete teaching position in question. Thus, the bold part above was also coded as *A2 Lack of Information*.

The *A2 Lack of Information* category could possibly serve as a justification used by the responding government agency to no longer deal with a stated problem in a citizen appeal. It could also serve as an argument which could encourage the citizen who submitted the appeal to reconsider or further specify the submission and thus make it processable for the responding department.

5.2.5.3. Party Principles

One of the most China-specific subcategories within the *Argumentation and Justification Category* is the subcategory *A3 Party Principles*. The criteria for a response part to be coded with this subcategory is whether it expresses party principles of the Communist Party of China. Only 4% of responses contained that category, but because of the high relevance as a political and ideology-based argument it deserves attention and a separate subcategory within the coding guide. When exemplifying and discussing the identified party principles, due to the scope and focus of this paper, it will not be possible to give extensive background information.

Thus, only one example will be discussed in more detail to illustrate exemplarily how a party principle might be used within a government response:

*“[...] During future work of the Medical Insurance Bureau of the County, there will be an improvement of efficiency when handling matters and **it will be possible to serve the masses better.** [...]” (Response 88)*

In the above example, the bold part was originally written as: “更好地服务群众” (geng haode fuwu qunzhong) (Response 88). the usage of the terms “群众” (qunzhong) which means “masses⁴⁶” and “服务” (fuwu), which means “to serve” makes the ideological character of this part of the response apparent. It can be said that this argumentation of improving the work of the medical insurance bureau in order to serve the masses in a better way could hint towards the party principle of “为人民服务” (wei renmin fuwu), which can be translated as “serving the people”; and the “群众路线” principle (qunzhong luxian), which means the “mass line”.

The principle of “serving the people” has relevance for the Marxist ideology, is defined as a basic objective of the communist party and can be regarded as one of the most essential and underlying qualities. Due to the reason that the communist party defines itself as only being able to exist through the support of the people, serving them is essential and as soon as this principle is not being followed, the people’s support might be lost which thus might mean also the end of the party. Therefore, this principle has also been defined as the main requirement for every cadre and member of the communist party and its importance is stressed highly (e.g.: Wang 2014).

The principle of the “mass line”, which has been discussed in Wang’s (2014) article together with the principle of “serving the people”, can be understood as closely related because its underlying message stresses the importance of the masses for the communist party. In the Chinese context, it has first been mentioned by Mao in 1948 and emphasizes on close cooperation with the masses by putting them at the center of the party’s actions (e.g.: Hammond 1978: 4; Wang 2014; Liu 2019).

Within the above context, since enhancing the work quality is per se work for the people, it can be said to serve the masses and thus fits into the party ideologies of “serving the people” and the “mass line”. By emphasizing that this action serves the masses, the respondent relates the assurance of improving the work to the party principles and thus integrates the argumentation into the Chinese political and ideological context.

⁴⁶ The concept of the term „masses“ in China has already been discussed in the *M6 Mediation* subcategory

As it can be seen, within the Chinese government responses party principles are used in order to legitimize or justify an explanation or procedure. Even though the usage of party principles and party ideology is less frequent than other argumentative measures, it still shows that the party ideology and ideas play an important role within China.

5.2.5.4. Responsibility Denied Without Further Reference

This last *Argumentation and Justification* related subcategory was created based on one outlier response within the random sample that employed a unique argumentation strategy within the analyzed responses. The definition of the subcategory is, that if a response part denies the responsibility of the responding agency without giving further information about other responsible actors and additionally does not offer an alternative way of solving the issue, it will be coded as A4 Responsibility Denied Without Further Reference. If there is more information about a responsible department given, it will be coded as I3 *Responsibility Information*.

The following response to a complaint about a rusty bridge and its unappealing appearance (Complaint 43) will illustrate this subcategory:

“Hello netizen, the management of the Liuye Lake Bridge has not yet been handed over to the Liuye Lake Management Committee. Liuye Lake Hotline Office” (Response 43)

This response requires some interpretation and discussion and it was also necessary to take into account the submitted complaint in order to fully understand the content and its implications. By pointing out that the right to manage the concerning bridge has not yet been given to the Liuye Management Committee, which seems due to the name related to the responding actor, the reason for why the bridge is not being dealt with and restored by the addressed actor is given only implicitly. Nevertheless, it is not being stated who is currently responsible for work regarding the bridge and also no further resolution prospects or measures were outlined.

Thus, the citizen received a response which does not further encourage her or him to engage with another agency, and furthermore no additional information about actions that could be done neither by the responding party nor the citizen in order to tackle the raised issue is provided. Since this is a peculiar case that differs from other textual parts of responses and since the likelihood that in a bigger sample this form of argumentation could be found more often, it has been decided to create this subcategory, even though there only exists one example within the coded sample.

5.2.6. Emotional and Empathy Category

The last category is the *Emotional and Empathy Category*. It has been derived from the study conducted by Grohs et al. (2016) based on their focus on content within government responses which expressed friendliness towards the submitter. For the analysis conducted in this master thesis, the criteria for a subcategory to be in the *Emotional and Empathy Category* is not only the expression of friendliness. Instead, the textual parts have to express emotional or empathetic content. This means that they have to imply an interaction on a personal level in an empathetic sense with the submitter. This served as the analytical focus for the development of the seven identified subcategories.

5.2.6.1. Appeal for Understanding

The first subcategory that will be introduced is *E1 Appeal for Understanding*. Text segments of responses which expressed an appeal for understanding towards the submitter were coded with that subcategory. In other words, if the responding party asked for the submitter's understanding, the respective part can be regarded as an *E1 Appeal for Understanding*. This category has only been found in 3% of the coded sample. The following examples will exemplify how it was found within the government responses.

*“[...] As soon as we receive the money, you will get it. **We kindly ask you to show understanding for the inconvenience you had to go through.** As discussed on the phone, due to the change of your husband's working unit, please bring the identity card, insurance card, after copying it and handing it over to the unit you will receive a one-time medical treatment subsidy. [...]” (Response 1)*

The above response asks the submitter of the complaint to be understanding for the inconveniences of delayed payment of insurance money and creates a conciliatory tone for the message. By adding a sentence like the bold part in Response 1 to the otherwise quite formal response creates a temporary change in style. Thus, a different sort of communication between the responding party and the submitter becomes possible.

The following response includes a shorter example of the subcategory *E1 Appeal for Understanding*:

“Friend: we have already received your letter about “when will the reparation work of a street will be started” Because your question needs examination and handling time,

*at the moment it is still under an examination and handling process. After we have finished handling this matter, we will send you more information about that situation. **Please understand.** Thank you for your understanding and support for our work! Office of Yucheng District, Ya'an City, the government office Yucheng district November 23”* (Response 51)

In the above response, the information which was requested by the submission could not be provided which got explained with more time needed in order to provide a response that contains the relevant information. Since progress regarding handling the complaint could not be achieved in a way that could have been reported within the response, the added line of “please understand”, or in Chinese “请您谅解” (qing nin liangjie) (Response 51), could have been included in the response in order to have a placating effect on the recipient.

Appeals for understanding are a rather rare subcategory within the *Emotional and Empathy Category*. Since they were often used in the context of conciliation due to a shortcoming of the response result with regards to the appeal content, it can be said that when they occur, there has been some issue or deficit regarding the resolution of an issue which has ultimately been admitted and acknowledged through the expression of an appeal for understanding. This subcategory can also be argued to express empathy towards the submitter.

5.2.6.2. Gratitude

One of the most frequent subcategories within the *Emotional and Empathy Category* was *E2 Gratitude*. When phrases of a response expressed that the responding party shows gratitude towards the submitter, the respective part was coded as *E2 Gratitude*. This subcategory was often found as a part of a phrase at the beginning or end of a response. The following examples will illustrate parts which were coded as *E2 Gratitude* further.

The following example shows a way gratitude was expressed within government responses that could be found in many other responses in a similar way:

*“**Thank you for your message.** The Tianxiangxin Park is an official, currently executed building project”* (Response 5)

The expressed gratitude is directed towards the submitter for sending the letter and thus for using the online complaint platform. “Thank you for your letter”, in Chinese “感谢您的留言” (ganxie nin de liuxin) or slightly similar phrases with the same meaning and under the same

context can be seen as an indicator for the responding party to be thankful for the received message. Moreover, expressing gratitude for the submitter's participation might invoke a feeling of rightfulness for the person that has submitted the appeal. It also shows that the messages are seen as a positive contribution that is being welcomed.

Other examples for gratitude expressed within government responses were phrases which were along the lines of thanking for the trust in the governments work, such as in Response 7: **“Thank you for your trust in our work”**⁴⁷, or thanking for paying attention and support for the government's work, as can be found in Response 10: **“We want to thank you again for paying attention and supporting Xuanhan cultural broadcasting”**⁴⁸.

An interesting example found was the expression of gratitude for supervision in Response 20: **“Thank you for your support and supervision”**⁴⁹, which is only fully explainable and understandable when looking at the outlined government guidelines, which stipulate and emphasize the importance of supervision for the government work. It is also in line with theoretical explanations coming from the state of the art literature, which highlight the role of government platforms as important for the central government in order to supervise and report about work done on lower administrative levels.

Generally speaking, the subcategory *E2 Gratitude* appears to manifest itself as similar phrases. Even though these phrases often seem to be solely added out of habit and the sincerity of the expressed gratitude towards the submitter can be questioned, parts that contain this category show a certain communication culture and have meaning and significance for the enacted and publicly portrayed citizen-government relationship in the sense that they are a sign to the submitter that messages from them are wanted and worth being thanked for.

5.2.6.3. Encouragement

The next subcategory from the *Emotional and Empathy Category* that was found within the coded sample was *E3 Encouragement*. Parts of responses which express that the responding party further encourages the submitter to engage with the platform and government agencies were coded with that category. This category needs to be differentiated from the already

⁴⁷ in Chinese “感谢您对我们工作的信任!” (ganxie nin dui women gongzuo de xinren) (Response 7)

⁴⁸ in Chinese “再次感谢市民对宣汉文化广电事业的关注和支持” (zai ci ganxie shimin dui xunhan wenhuaguangdianshiye de guanzhu he zhichi) (Response 10)

⁴⁹ in Chinese “感谢网友对我区城市管理工作的监督与支持” (ganxie wangyou dui wo qu chengshi guanli gongzuo de jiandu yu zhichi) (Response 20)

introduced category *I2 Advice* which is a part of the *Information Category*. If the “advice” is given to engage with the platform again, the encouragement category overrules the advice category.

The following responses and examples will further illustrate this subcategory:

*“Hello, the question you have raised was already answered on the phone with you. **If you have further questions you can call this number for further inquiry**” (Response 79)*

The above response contains a case of the subcategory *E3 Encouragement*. The bold part invites the submitter to further engage with the responding department through the provided phone number, above indicated as the underlined text segment which was coded as *I1 Contact Information*, in case the response has not been satisfying or still leaves the citizen with doubts about the situation. By adding such a phrase within a response, the communication is being kept open by the responding party. Thus, by encouraging to further engage with the department, this offer can give the impression that further contact is wanted and even welcomed. Another special aspect of Response 79 is, that it is stated that the communication happened via a phone call, even though it was apparent from the dataset that the person submitting the message did that in a written form. From this response, it is hard to tell how the communication between the citizen and the government looked like. The fact that the appeal still received a response in the form of a written reply could indicate that it might have an additional protocolling function which is more relevant for keeping track in a written way about how submissions were handled by the responding agency.

*“[...] If you have further doubts, please put forward more detailed information about that situation and also leave your contact information, so that our staff members can verify. Thank you for supporting our work **and we welcome you to continue supervising and supporting our work.**” (Response 11)*

When it comes to the bold part of the above response, this sort of encouragement invites the citizen in a more general sense to make use of the platform for other concerns and submissions with relation to the work done by the responding part. Like in Response 20 which was discussed in the previous subchapter, the aspect of 监督 (jiandu), which means “to supervise”, supervision of the government agency’s work is brought up. This was already further elucidated in the previous example.

Encouraging the citizens to further interact and communicate with the government agencies via the online complaint platforms and put forward their concerns, ideas and suggestions, shows a form of friendly interaction amidst the otherwise rather formal way of responding to citizen appeals. This subcategory can be interpreted in a similar way as the category *E2 Gratitude*, which also expresses that the usage of the platform is wanted and welcomed.

5.2.6.4. Wishing Well

Only 6% of responses contained the next identified subcategory *E4 Wishing Well*. By definition, every part of a response that contained contents which expressed good wishes towards the submitter was coded with this subcategory. Most of the time, such phrases were found at the end of a response where they were used to round out the message and give it a friendly and courteous tone. The following examples will be used to show different facets of this subcategory.

*“Hello, your message was received by liuyan.people.com and by the CPC county secretary, this is our answer. The market was planned under local government leadership with the cooperation of different departments after the planning regarding vendor’s stalls and progressive refinery an opening date will be chosen. Thank you for your letter, **we wish you a happy life, safety and health for your family.**” (Response 4)*

The above response used phrases which could be identified as the category *E2 Gratitude*, highlighted by underlining, and *E4 Wishing Well*, which is highlighted as the bold part. Looking at the ending phrases in the context of the whole response, the above information given to the request about when a certain market opens (Request 4), adds a more friendly tone to the response in general and could invoke positive feelings for the submitter which could generate a positive image of the government service.

Another example found in Response 30 was a simple “祝好” (zhuhao), which could be translated as “wish you all the best”, at the end of the response to a complaint about the dangers of a box type transformer (complaint 30). This way of expressing good wishes towards the submitter seems more formal and is a frequently used phrase at the end of messages in Chinese, which could mean that there could be less or more meaning and conveyed emotion behind different examples of the category *E4 Wishing Well*.

For example, Response 86 seems to contain a more individualized manifestation of *E4* towards the submitter: “Thank you for your letter. **Happy Chinese New Year and all the best for your family**” (Response 86). It has to be noted that this message was written in response to a gratitude

message submitted by a citizen (Message 86) and thus does not contain any further content than the good wishes. This could also explain the fact that it only contains text segments which were coded as subcategories of the *Emotional and Empathy Category*.

This subcategory could be found in different contexts and different variations, but they all added a friendly tone to the message since they directly addressed the submitter in a courteous and respectful way. This could mean that with this category, a more equal and friendly relationship between the submitter and the responding party gets apparent.

5.2.6.5. Assurance

The subcategory *E5 Assurance* was found comparatively often within the coded sample. Parts of a response which expressed reassurance that the complaint or submission put forward by the citizen was taken seriously by the responding actor were coded with this subcategory. If there was doubt about assigning the subcategory to a response part because it could also be coded as a measure, it was decided that the *E5 Assurance* category will be prioritized.

The following example will show why this rule had to be formulated within the coding guide:

[...] In a next step, the bureau will continue to pay attention to the incident and strengthen communication and coordination with relevant departments of Shenzhen.
[...] (Response 42)

The bold part highlights the section which was coded as *E5 Assurance*. When only looking at the translation, it seems rather clear how to code this part of the response, but the Chinese version and the fact that it is tied in with the measure *M7fa Coordination*, highlighted by underlining, made it more difficult to differentiate. The Chinese original text used the verb “进行” (jinxing), which can be translated as „conduct” or „carry out”, and thus hints to a measure rather than to an act of assurance. But because the conducted action is to pay more attention, it was decided to code this part and similar parts as *E5 Assurance*.

Other examples found were much clearer and most of them consisted of phrases which only varied slightly from response to response, as can be seen when looking at the following two examples:

*“Hello netizen! We have received your complaint regarding an illegally constructed and opened restaurant which is noisy and disturbs the life of residents around it⁵⁰, it is located at the Nangang Road opposite to the national taxation bureau. **Our leaders pay a lot of attention to it.** [...]” (Response 55)*

*“Hello honored netizen, **your problem is taken very seriously by our department.** We will send more police personnel and increase the control of traffic violations like randomly parked cars. [...]” (Response 34)*

It can be seen that in both examples, there is assurance about how serious the responding party is taking the issue expressed. When looking at the Chinese wording, it gets even more apparent how similar the wording between the two cases is. Within Response 55: “我局领导**高度重视**您所反映的问题” (Wo ju lingdao gaodu zhongshi nin suo fanying de wenti) and Response 34: “我局交管部门**十分重视**” (Wo ju jiaoguan bumen shifen zhongshi), the bold parts both use the verb “重视” with an added adverb, in these cases “十分” (shifen) and “高度” (gaodu), which means “very” in both cases in front of the verb.

By expressing that the matter is taken seriously, the responding parties are conveying the information that because of that, handling the matter was, is or will be done with diligence, and thus will not be neglected. Why certain responses contain phrases of assurance and others do not cannot be answered within this master thesis, but interestingly, the topics that got responded to with the two above response examples were both related to illegal behavior. The proposed possible explanations for the occurrence of the subcategory *E5 Assurance* are, that assuring about the attention to and importance of the reported matter could hint towards the fact that a response featuring this subcategory could be seen as a response to a more relevant and urgent concern brought forward by the citizen. Of course, it could as well be a phrase that is used in order to convey the feeling that the matter is taken seriously.

5.2.6.6. Apology

E6 Apology is an *Emotional and Empathy Category* related subcategory that has only been found once within the coded sample. If a part of a response expressed that the responding party is feeling sorry towards the submitter, it was coded as *E6 Apology*. Due to the fact that an

⁵⁰ The background information to noise pollution related complaints and illegal construction in China has already been discussed in the subchapters that introduced the subcategories *M4 Implementation* and *M9 Enforcement*

apology for something from a government agency has only been found once, this subcategory was created and kept because it is believed that within a larger sample, there could potentially exist more parts that can be coded as *E6 Apology*.

In order to illustrate in what context, the responding party apologized to the submitter, the following response will be used.

*“[...] Regarding your opinion that the staff of the Medical Insurance Bureau is at odds with you and causing a delay in reporting. We investigated and there are many reasons for the delay in reporting maternity insurance. **We apologize for that.** The county medical insurance bureau is responsible for the staff that reimburses and reviews maternity insurance materials and at the same time, it is responsible for the county’s employees’ work injury treatment investigation, the basic regulations for getting insurance, and work like the investigation about payment for industrial work injuries, deaths and long term payment for left behind family members; so the process of transferring the maternity insurance fund from the county finance bureau and the redemption of the reimbursement expenses has of course a time difference. During future work of the Medical Insurance Bureau of the County, there will be an improvement of efficiency when handling matters and it will be possible to serve the masses better. [...]” (Response 88)*

It can be seen that the findings of the responding government agency seem to have confirmed that there are some problems with the medical insurance bureau that caused a delay of the reporting of maternity insurance in this case. Instead of only stating the finding that there exists a time delay problem regarding the payment of maternity insurance, the responding party expressed empathy towards the submitter by apologizing for the delay. The fact that there was an apology for a department’s behavior shows that it is admitted that there is something not going the way it should and according to plan. However, it is also important to note that the explanation following the apology seems to mitigate the apology again. It could be argued that the maintenance of the government department’s positive image seems to be important, and fully acknowledging that the department is not working properly is thus not an option within government responses. Also, the fact that only one apology in this form was found within the analyzed sample supports this proposition.

5.2.6.7. Greeting

The majority of the analyzed government responses included the subcategory *E7 Greeting* at the start of the response. This subcategory was defined as any parts which express a greeting towards the submitter. Since it can be argued that a greeting adds a polite and friendly tone to a message, this subcategory was incorporated in the *Emotional and Empathy Category*, and not in the *Structure Category*, even though a greeting could be seen as an introduction and thus also a structural element of a response.

Greetings were found in slightly different ways, but it can be said that they repeated themselves largely throughout the coded sample. Some examples of this category were simply “您好” (nihao: hello, polite form, e.g.: Response 2) or “你好” (nihao: hello, more informal; e.g.: Response 3). There were also references to the submitter found, for example: “**Honored netizen, hello!** [...]” (Response 6), or referring to the submitter with their surname, such as: “**Hello Mr. X!** [...]” (Response 32).

Even though the majority, meaning 58 out of 100 responses, featured a greeting like the above examples, 42 responses, which is nearly half of the analyzed responses, did not include a greeting at the beginning of the response. It could be argued that adding a greeting at the beginning of a response indicates respect, formality and could also invoke more positive feelings for the reader right away, of course with differing degrees of friendliness or formality depending on the form of greeting. Thus, this seemingly insignificant subcategory should not be underestimated when it comes to analyzing government responses, since even such a small part of a response like a greeting shows a difference in communication and can potentially have an effect on the recipient.

5.3. Summary and Assessment of the Findings

Within this subchapter, the outlined findings which were discussed in more detail within the subchapter that introduced the coding guide will be summarized⁵¹ in order to give a better overview of what these findings could imply and how the different predefined categories manifested themselves within the analyzed random sample of government responses. To put the findings generated by the qualitative analysis in perspective, the summary of the findings will also give

⁵¹ A table which summarizes the quantities of each subcategory can be found under Appendix 2

a quantitative overview⁵² of different categories and the occurrence of the inductively found subcategories.

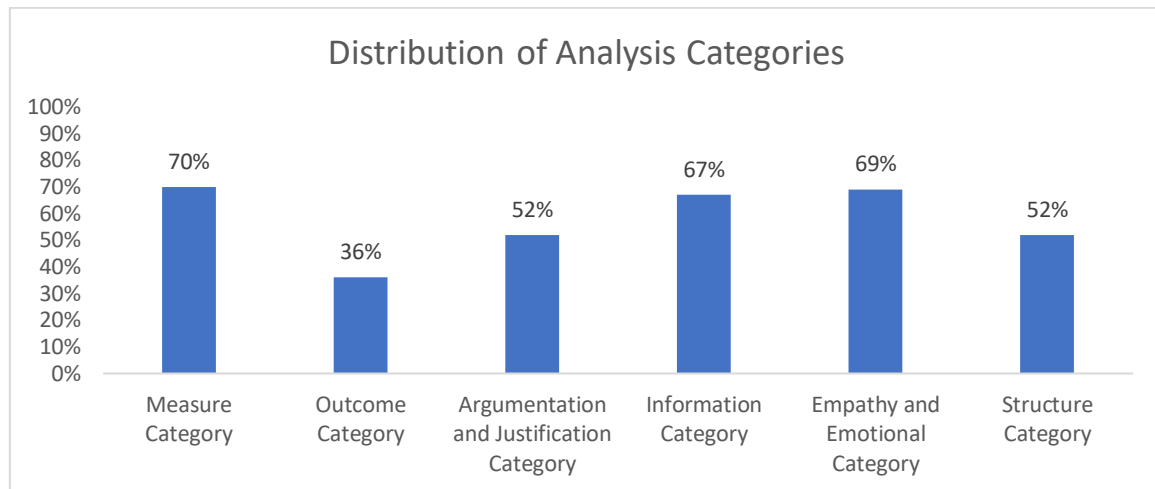


Figure 4 Distribution of Categories (Source: Dataset)

The first graph that will be discussed is the above distribution. It shows the occurrences the different categories within the coded sample. The three that appeared the most often in responses are the *Measure*, *Information* and *Empathy and Emotion Categories*. The most frequent type of category can be said to be the *Measure Category* with subcategories appearing in 70% of responses. Second comes the *Empathy and Emotion Category* which appeared in 69% of the responses, closely followed by the *Information Category* with 67%. About 50% of responses featured parts which were coded with an *Argumentation and Justification Category* related subcategory and the same applies for the *Structure Category*. It seems like there is a high focus laid upon emphasizing on measures, and thus acting on the reported issues, providing information and adding phrases and parts to a response that can be said to convey emotion or empathy. The *Outcome Category* has been found only in 36% of the responses, which makes it the least featured category.

It needs to be noted that the interpretation of these findings also requires taking into account the argument that how the government responds to submissions is likely to be determined by the content of the message they respond to. For the analyzed sample, the content of the submission which got responded to was not limited, which means that different types of submissions

⁵² The numbers which were used in order to create the following graphs were generated the following way: It was counted whether a certain category appeared within a response or not. If it appeared at least once, the corresponding response was counted as a response that contains at least one instance of the of this category or subcategory. The source for each graph is the Dataset Excel document which also contains the random sample

such as complaints, suggestions, request etc. or a mixed form of these types with various topics were the basis of the analyzed responses.

The following graphs will give more in-depth insights into the distribution of subcategories of the different analysis levels in order to assess how the manifestations of each category compare with each other. The first graph that is going to be discussed contains measure subcategories and the outcome category, since it can be said that these two category types of analysis are closely related.

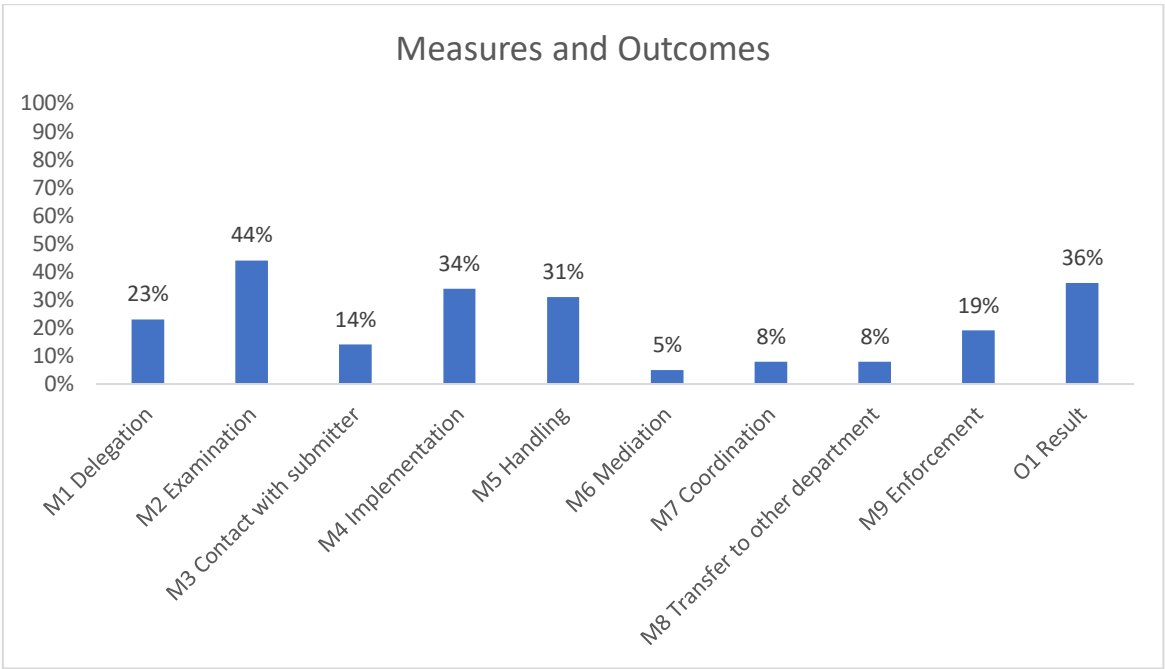


Figure 5 Measures and Outcomes (Source: Dataset)

When it comes to the *Measure Category*, there have been found nine different manifestations in the form of differentiable measures when coding the government responses. Since different measures such as investigating, handling, mediating, enforcing, coordinating etc. are referred to within government responses, it can be said that an image gets conveyed by the responding agency that action is being taken beyond just responding to concerns submitted online. It also shows that there is effort put into dealing with a reported issue, and thus the response content goes beyond simply advising or informing about certain backgrounds. By including references to certain measures being taken, different actions initiated by the government and other actors with regards to certain concerns raised within citizen appeals become transparent and open to scrutiny. The most frequent measures that were referred to within government responses are *M2 Examination*, *M4 Implementation* and *M5 Handling*, the rarest measure subcategories are *M6 Mediation*, *M7 Coordination* and *M8 Transfer to another department*. From these findings, it can be inferred that when receiving a citizen appeal, the responding agencies tend to most

likely investigate the circumstance, claim that some unspecified measures are undertaken and also refer to more specific measures being implemented tailored to the submitted appeal. When it comes to the rarer measures, it could be argued that they appear in fewer responses because they might demand a more specific circumstance in order to be taken and can be regarded as less generic than for example *M2 Examination* and *M5 Handling*, which could be claimed to be done as a response to various situations reflected within a submission.

The *Outcome Category* and its subcategory *O1 Result* can be regarded as closely related to the *Measure Category*'s subcategories. By finding that the responses contain not only a protocol of different measures that were, are, or will be taken, but also refer to the outcomes that were or will be achieved, it is shown that there is either a solution prospect given or that the already made achievements such as gaining knowledge from an investigation are referred to. This information is transparently reported to the recipient of the response. Outcomes can thus be said to reflect the current stage of knowledge gained by the responding agency through measures or outline certain improvements that could be achieved through measures. By comparing the share of the outcome category with the share of several measure subcategories combined, it can be said that within 100 responses, 70 featured at least one measure and 36 of these 70 featured at least one outcome for the reported measures. Out of these 36, it could be assumed that they were reported as a result of the most frequently found measures. Due to the scope of this master thesis, a correlation analysis of certain subcategories was not conducted, which is why questions regarding correlations are left for future research.

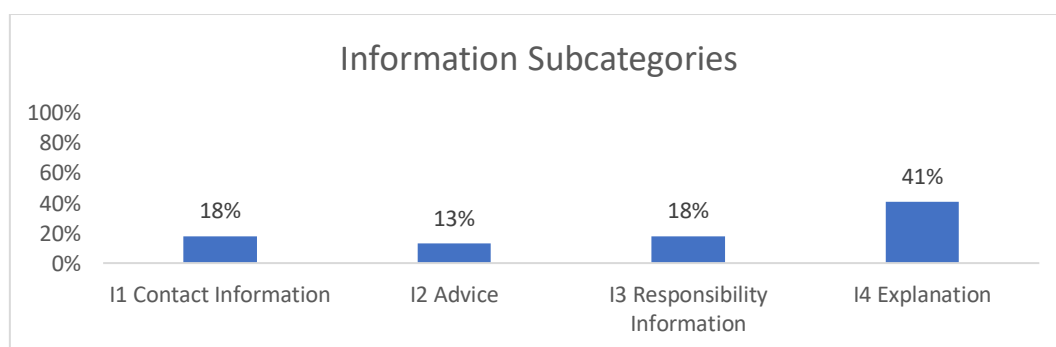


Figure 6 Information Subcategories (Source: Dataset)

The *Information Category* can be said to contain subcategories that serve a deeper understanding of circumstances and enable the recipient of the response to take further actions themselves through the information provided. Responses that feature this level outline responsibilities give further insights into backgrounds of different matters and provide guidance and relevant contact information by outlining options and procedures to the recipient in order for them to achieve a

favorable result. Thus, it can be said that informational content enriches the recipient's knowledge on how and why certain situations exist, but also on how it is possible to engage with government agencies and other relevant actors. It is apparent from the graph above that the most prominent informational subcategory which could be found in 41% of responses is *I4 Explanation*. Thus, it could be assumed that providing explanatory information to the submitter is regarded as important and might also line up with the demand expressed within the citizen appeals. Information regarding responsible actors and contact information is also often provided, but it can be assumed that the frequency of these subcategories, as well as the advice subcategory, could be depending on what sort of information is required by the submitter.

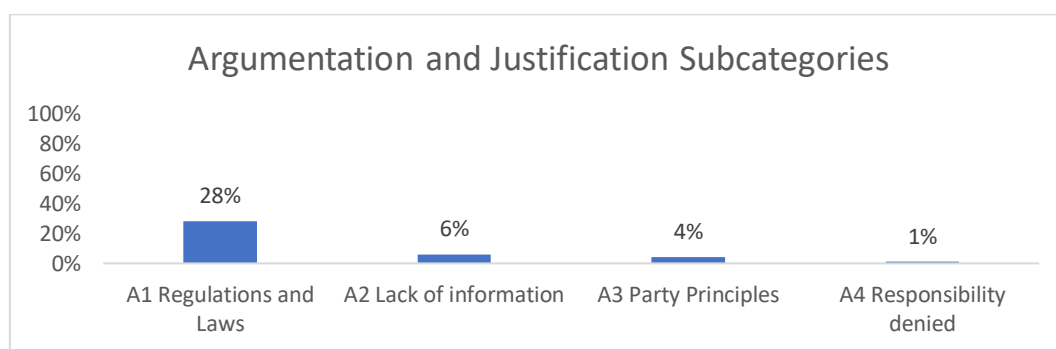


Figure 7 Argumentation and Justification Subcategories (Source: Dataset)

The *Argumentation and Justification Category* manifested itself in the form of subcategories related to regulations, laws and principles, which could be said to be used in order to justify and back up certain informational contents. These ways of justification and argumentation can also be seen as a way of legitimization of certain actions and procedures. Additionally, it has to be noted that by referring to regulations, laws and principles, further insights which can be said to have an informational character about the legal background on certain issues were provided to the submitter. Other manifestations of this category have been found to be the denial of responsibility and the argument of lacking information from the submission, which was used in order to justify that it was not able to further engage in and handle a certain issue by the respondent. Referring to laws, regulations and lawful behavior is comparatively the most frequent subcategory of the *Argumentation and Justification Category* within government responses. Thus, it seems like there is a lot of emphasis put on legal aspects, policies and also highlighting the lawfulness of certain situations. The subcategory *A3 Party Principles* could not be found very often, but it can be said that it is closer related to *A1 Regulations and Laws* and just refers to a specific set of regulations which also has a justifying character. From these results, it could be concluded that legal arguments seem to be more popular than arguments relating to the party and its principles, which means that drawing on these results, it can be said that within the

analyzed sample there is a greater emphasis on law than ideology apparent in government responses.

The fact that only one response featured the argumentation of not being responsible at all without providing further information indicates that appeals seem to not just simply be rejected by the respondent. Giving the submitter the information that the submitted message does not provide a sufficient basis for the responding agency to respond in an appropriate way seems to be a common way to justify a shortcoming of response quality instead of expressing complete denial of dealing with the issue without further justification. Thus, it could be argued that if a response is provided to the submitter, it is unlikely that within that response it is claimed that handling the matter is not possible without providing further information or justification.

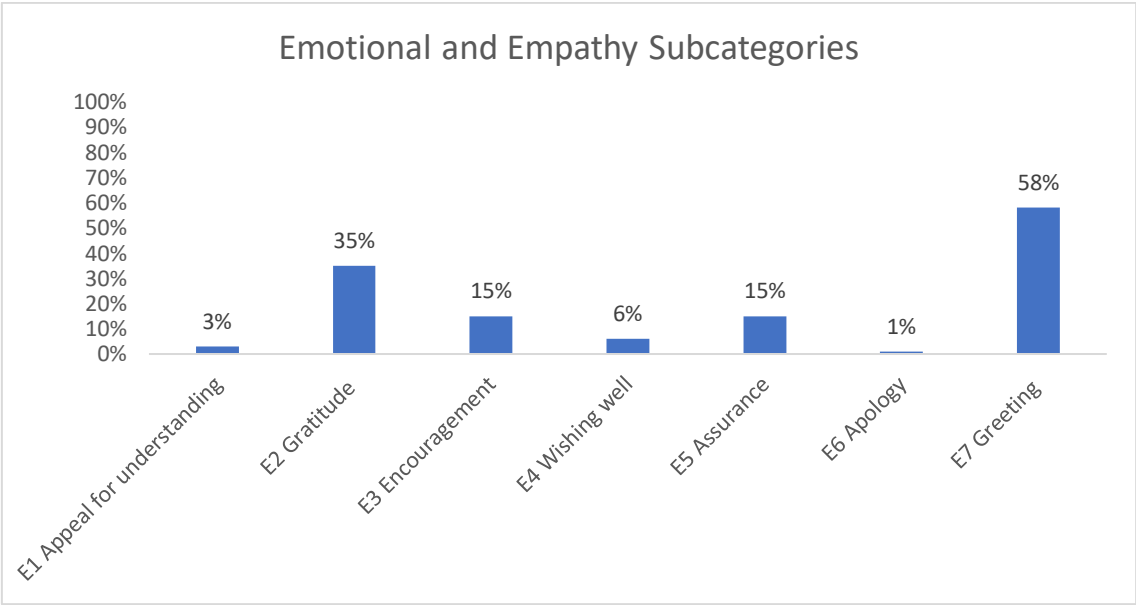


Figure 8 Emotion and Empathy Categories (Source: Dataset)

When it comes to the expression of emotional and empathetic contents within government response, there have been found seven different subcategories which are related to the *Emotional and Empathy Category*. These subcategories range from simple greetings to well wishes, encouragement, assurance and gratitude expressed towards the submitter, appeals for understanding and an apology. Thus, government responses do not only feature information based content, the reporting of measures and justifying parts, but also have an aspect of interaction that goes on a more personal, relationship oriented level with the submitter of the appeal. The most frequent subcategory per response is *E7 Greeting*. This indicates that greetings are used habitual in written communication and messages, which seems a reasonable and obvious explanation and would even mean that this subcategory could be regarded as rather meaningless for the analysis of government responses. Still, the absence of a greeting in 42% of analyzed responses

shows that it does not necessarily have to be a part of a government response and it can be argued that adding a greeting contributes to a more friendly tone of the response. Interestingly, in regards to the other subcategories, *E2 Gratitude*, *E3 Encouragement* and *E5 Assurance* could be found quite frequently compared to the rest of the identified subcategories that belong to the *Emotional and Empathy Category*. These three subcategories indicate on similar levels that from the government side of the communication process, submissions from the public are appreciated, valued and taken seriously.

When looking at the three least featured subcategories *E6 Apology*, *E1 Appeal for understanding* and *E4 Wishing well* which belong to the *Emotional and Empathy Category*; it can be said that an acknowledgement of problems in the sense of admitting them in an empathetic way can be found only rarely within government responses. Also, good wishes do not seem to be considered as a crucial aspect. These insights show trends of what level of emotional and empathetic content is regarded as important to include when communicating with the people. It seems that emphasizing on the importance of submitting messages to the online complaint platforms and being thankful and encouraging about citizen participation, takes priority over expressing sympathy with expressed problems and issues.

When seeing the responses as *Public Transcripts*, it cannot be said whether these expressions are formulated in a sincere way. Rather, it has to be assumed that they portray a strategic communication with the submitter. Still, it can be argued that the presence of features that create a more friendly and courteous tone could potentially be able to invoke positive feelings on the end of the recipient, which might even be the wanted effect by the government agency.

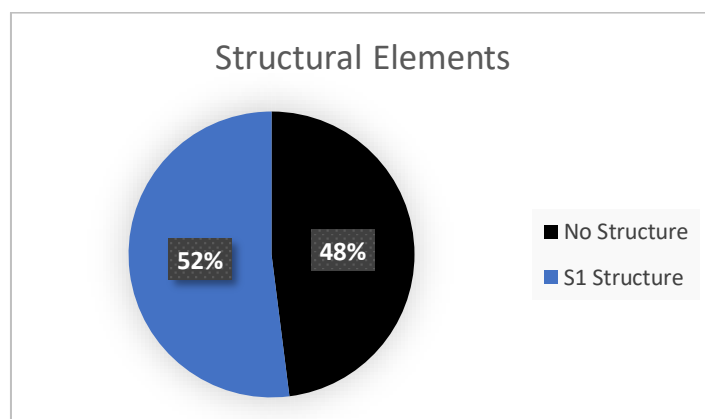


Figure 9 Structural Elements (Source: Dataset)

The structural aspect of a response which has been captured in the *Structure Category* did manifest itself as elements that gave the responses a better readability and formality. It could be seen that many phrases which were coded as the structural subcategory had a repetitive

character. Thus, observing similar textual elements which serve a structural purpose across a larger sample of responses could be seen as a sign of an emerging way of communication for the government-citizen interaction. When looking at the share of responses that contain structural elements, it is not possible to tell whether there exists a trend of adding structural elements to a government response. Nevertheless, by including structural elements, it can be said that a large proportion of the responses provide a rather formal and to some extent reader-friendly and structured form of message to the submitters, which could be seen as providing a service and employing a formalized style of responding.

In summary of the above assessments, it can be said that only through analyzing a larger sample of government responses, it was possible to grasp different manifestations of reoccurring patterns and parts in the form of identified subcategories which belong to different, largely deductively predefined categories. The qualitative insights gained by assessing the manifestations of these categories conducted better understanding of the nuances of the government-citizen communication in China and by additionally assessing these results quantitatively, trends, tendencies and priorities of how the government agencies tend to respond to the people could be found and discussed.

When looking at the frequency, style and type of subcategories which are response components that constitute government responses, the most frequently referred to measures were the acts of examining, implementing and delegating. Additionally, the unspecified claim of handling a situation could be found as being the third most frequent subcategory under the measure category. Also, outcomes are featured within the Information was provided in most cases in the form of explanations, followed by the provision of responsibility and contact information and lastly by advice given. The most frequently found subcategory of the argumentation and justification category was the reference of law and regulation regulated content. Emotional and empathetic expressions within government responses were found to be greetings, the expression of gratitude, assurance, and encouragement, whereas it has to be noted that empathetic expressions such as apologies or appeals for understanding could be found rarely.

Thus, based on these findings regarding the nature of government responses in China, the conveyed image the government shows by responding to citizen appeals can be discussed. This interpretation relates the findings back to the underlying theoretical lens of *Public Transcripts*, which was chosen in order to assess and interpret the analyzed government responses. It can be said that the government responses have a rather practically and informationally oriented focus which is backed up largely by legal arguments and the reference to certain regulations and laws.

Many of them can be said to remind one of an operation protocol which reports every step and measure that has been undertaken, provides detailed explanations and clearly outlines responsibilities and puts an emphasis on encouraging the people to make use of the online complaint platforms. This hints at an image of a government that acts in a lawful and justified way on reported issues, reports and informs about procedures and also provides transparency regarding responsibility scopes of different actors and joint action. Additionally, by frequently including gratitude, encouragement and assurance, the government conveys the image that it is happily receiving messages from the citizens and also strives for good service quality when it comes to handling issues being brought forward within the submissions posted on the online complaint platforms. Nevertheless, the responses do not reflect the image of a government that is empathetic towards the citizens, as apologies and appeals for understanding have been only found rarely within the responses.

The way the government responds to its citizens can be explained with the theoretical logic of the concept of *Public Transcripts*. Since it can be argued that the government presents itself in an involved and dedicated way by claiming to conduct measures, providing information and stressing legal aspects and furthermore inviting citizen participation, it shows itself in a positive light. This observation is not surprising when drawing on the concept of *Public Transcripts*, as the actor with more power steers the communication and sets the stage in a flattering light for themselves. Thus, the lack of acknowledgment of shortcomings regarding government work and the low number of apologies and appeals for understanding can be explained as well, since showing and admitting weaknesses would not portray the government in a positive light.

This way of communicating with the submitters of messages to the online complaint platforms can also be interpreted with regards to the role the citizens get assigned in this communication process. Through the online complaint platforms, they put forward appeals and demand action to be taken on a certain issue, or they request information to be provided by the government. Since they are receiving responses which often contain information and the claim that action was, is or will be taken, they are recipients of a service provided by the Chinese government. Thus, they are enabled to facilitate the government services to their benefits. Conversely, the way the government interacts with the citizens on an interpersonal level shows rather a facilitation of the citizens by inviting them to supervise the government work and share potentially relevant information on the online complaint platforms. As a result, it can be said that the citizens are strategically invited to participate and are being utilized by the government. In return,

they get the option of voicing grievances and potentially receiving support and assistance by the government which could be useful for them.

6. Discussion

Within the discussion chapter, the above findings will be firstly discussed in relation to the outlined government guidelines, secondly the insights gained will be integrated into the state of the art. Thirdly, the argument for proposing an analytical framework for assessing government responses is made. Lastly, further implications and interpretations will be made, followed by a discussion of limitations.

6.1. Coherence with Government Propositions

The different identified subcategories of each category that were considered when analyzing the government responses can now be related and contextualized with the central government's guidelines and requirements for the government agencies found in the respective assessed government documents. By doing so, the alignment between the conveyed image of the government agency and the expectations of the central government can be assessed. Additionally, the alignment with the expectations by the central government also shows to what extent the government holds the "promise" being made to the public regarding what kind of service and treatment is offered and can be expected on online complaint platforms. The basis for this assessment is the conveyed image that could be empirically found through the conducted analysis, which considered the analyzed responses as *Public Transcripts*; and the expectations for that image by the central government, which has been elaborated through the assessment of selected central government documents. The alignment with the different propositions has been reviewed below.

Transparency, Opinion Collection and Accessibility

Firstly, the need for openness when it comes to handling unjust behavior and concerns of the public can be said to be met by implementing public online complaint platforms. They also meet the outlined requirement of collecting the opinions simply by providing these channels. As the focus of the thesis was not laid upon an assessment of the accessibility and convenience of the platforms themselves, these aspects cannot be included in the discussion.

Providing Information

One of the key requirements of the central government was to provide information to the people. Of course, this proposition was not only formulated with regards to the online complaint platforms, but rather in general when it comes to government websites which should make documents, relevant information about government work, regulations etc. transparent and accessible

to the citizens. With relation to government responses, the principle of transparency and information provision can be said to apply as well. It could be found within the central government documents that especially information with explanatory character, policies, and clarifications about responsibilities of different departments should be provided. The analysis of government responses showed that each of these points could be found to be reflected in the inductively identified subcategories.

The *I4 Explanation* subcategory was one of the most frequently found informational subcategories and has great importance when it comes to the formulated proposition of providing information in the form of detailed explanations. The same applies to the *I3 Responsibility Information* subcategory, which meets the requirement of clarifying responsibilities for certain issues. Also, the need to provide contact information was explicitly mentioned within the government documents in the context of providing an alternative information source if the responding department cannot provide the requested information. Thus, the subcategory *I1 Contact Information* can be regarded as relevant for the government proposition of providing information. Another subcategory which does not fall under the *Information Category*, but still could be said to apply to this section, is *A1 Regulations and Laws*. This is because the aspect of citing laws and referring to them meets the requirement of referencing information about certain policies. Nevertheless, for this subcategory, the informational proposition is only fully met if explanations come along with these cited laws and regulations.

Handling Problems

The next big aspect is the requirement of handling problems and appeals brought forward by citizens. More specifically, it is stipulated in the government documents that the central government wants the agencies to investigate and verify issues, resolve them, answer questions, resolve conflicts and make use of mediation, cooperate with other relevant actors, handle issues in a lawful way, let the submitter know if the information provided in the submission is not sufficient in order for it to be handled, and respond in a meaningful and timely way. These aspects shall now be broken down and integrated into the findings.

The general imperative of handling problems which are raised by the people in submissions sent to the government agencies, are met by the different types of measures which were found within the responses. The subcategories *M5 Handling* and *M4 Implementation* could be regarded as relating subcategories to this general call for taking action and working on a raised

issue. This is because they express on the one hand that action is being taken, and on the other hand that specific measures are employed in order to work on an issue.

When looking at more specific requirements formulated in the government documents regarding how to handle submissions, the most frequent measure *M2 Examination* can be related to the expressed need of investigating and verifying⁵³ an issue. Due to the frequency of this measure, this requirement seems to be strongly met by the responding actors. The requirement of resolving conflicts through mediation can be related to the *M6 Mediation* subcategory, but it must be noted that this is one of the rarer measures that could be found in the responses. The requirement of working with other parties can be seen to be reflected in the subcategory *M7 Coordination*, which refers to parts of the responses where shared work and responsibility becomes apparent, and thus working with other parties is implied. The same applies for *M1 Delegation* which shows that certain tasks are given to other actors and work is being shared. Also, *M8 Transfer to another department* falls under this requirement because the message is being transferred to an actor who can further handle the matter.

The call for solving issues being put forward can be related to the *O1 Result* subcategory. Through reporting the effects and results of measures, it can be shown that progress has been made through working on a certain matter. This does not mean that every reported outcome or result of a measure can be regarded as the complete solution for the reported issue. Since the analysis of government responses was not done with the goal to assess how successfully solutions of an issue were achieved, it cannot be fully answered whether the responses meet this requirement.

The subcategories under the *Information Category*, especially *I3 Advice* and *I4 Explanation*, can be said to contribute to answering questions in an informative way and thus are relatable to the government guideline of handling and answering questions of the public. For example, by giving advice about how to handle a certain issue, questions about uncertainty regarding administrative procedures were answered. By providing background information, or other explanatory parts which were coded as *I4 Explanation*, the central government's requirement of answering questions to the public can be met as well. Furthermore, the existence of the argumentative subcategory *A2 Lack of Information* shows that the concrete proposition of informing the

⁵³ The terms “to verify” (e.g. 核实 *heshi*), “to investigate” (e.g. 检查 *jiancha*) and other synonyms for this action can be found in the government responses and can be regarded as an indicator for the category *M2 Examination*

submitter that the message is not sufficient in order to work on the reflected issue is being reflected in government responses.

In some government documents, the explicit call for lawful and legal ways of handling issues and conducting government work was found. Within the responses, it could be found that the subcategory *A1 Regulations and Laws* was used in the sense of referring to government work being conducted according to law. This could show that the responding agency wants to highlight this aspect, maybe also because the central government documents emphasize on the importance of lawful government work. Additionally, the measure *M9 Enforcement*, which captures for example law enforcement actions, can be related to this guideline as laws are being enforced and thus work is done in a lawful way.

Interestingly, the subcategory *A4 Responsibility denied without further reference* can be regarded as the only subcategory that goes directly against the central government's guidelines. It is explicitly requested that the government agency provides responses that are meaningful and it should be explained when certain issues cannot be worked on in order to enable the submitter of the message to understand and comprehend the government work. In that sense, A scenario where the government agency just informs the submitter that the message has been forwarded to another department, which would refer to the subcategory *M8 Transfer to another department*, without providing additional information on why this has happened, would also breach the central government's requirements.

The difficulty is that the government requirement to provide a meaningful response to issues is a vague, and further, the determination of what is meaningful is subjective. Thus, the meaningfulness of a response is difficult to fully assessed when looking at the identified subcategories. In this thesis, the way the government responds overall has been determined to be potentially meaningful to the citizens, as action is taken and information provided. The aspect of timely responding to citizen appeals could not be assessed based on the conducted analysis because this factor falls outside of the scope of this master thesis.

Encouraging Participation

An often emphasized goal within the assessed government documents is the need to encourage citizen participation. This is because the administrative government work requires the people to supervise it, provide input, and give information which can then be used to monitor public sentiment reflected through the submissions. Several subcategories from the *Emotional and Empathy Category* are relatable and explainable in this context.

The main subcategories which could have an encouraging effect are *E2 Gratitude* and *E3 Encouragement*. They were frequently found among subcategories of the *Emotional and Empathy Category* and can be regarded as an important aspect of government responses. These subcategories manifested themselves within government responses by referring to the aspect of “supervision” of the government work and gratitude for the input and cooperation by the people. This directly reflects the reasoning of why encouragement of the people to participate is wanted. Thus, it can be shown that the requirements of supervising government work and inviting citizen participation by the central government are quite literally integrated and visible in government responses. However, the aspect of monitoring public sentiment was not apparent within the responses. This may be because this aspect would highlight the interest of the government and would thus divert from a response which conveys that it is people-centered and focused on the interests and rights of the citizens, which is also outlined within the government documents.

Maintaining a Good Relationship with the People

The aspect of maintaining a good relationship with the people can be said to be reflected in the government documents several times. It ties in together with the raised concerns about government image and credibility, which is an important aspect of the relationship between the government and the citizens. It is proposed that especially subcategories from the *Emotional and Empathy Category* can be regarded as being relevant when looking at how this guideline is reflected within government responses. A friendly tone and a courteous manner when interacting with citizens can be said to be an indicator for the attempt of contributing to a good relationship with the people. Especially the subcategories *E1 Appeal for understanding*, *E4 Wishing Well*, *E5 Assurance*, *E6 Apology* and *E7 Greeting* are indicators for maintaining a good relationship since they are friendly and empathetic signals from the government. They could also lead to “straighten out emotions” which was stated in one of the government documents (General Office of the State Council 2014). It must be noted that these subcategories, except the *E7 Greeting* subcategory, do not appear too often within government responses and thus do not seem to have a high priority. Aspects of credibility, an emphasis on facts and the reduction of doubts can be related to references of laws and regulations which resonates with the subcategories *A1 Regulations and Laws*, that contributes to credibility and factuality of a response, and *I4 Explanation*, which contributes to factuality and doubt reduction.

The *Structure Category* of responses turns out to be rather subservient with regards to the outlined government guidelines. As structuring a response adds formality and readability, it could be argued that it relates to the need of conveying a good image of the government and providing

a service with convenience to the people. Thus, it only contributes slightly to meet the expectations of the central government.

Summary

Overall, the qualitative findings of the different possible components of government responses broken down to categories and subcategories can be said to resonate with the government guidelines. The analyzed sample reflects their expectations and implementation by using certain wording, reacting in a way that can be said to be required by the central government and thus seem to largely meet the formulated goals of how the government should respond and interact with its citizens. Nevertheless, it can be said that due to the frequency of certain categories and subcategories there exist certain trends regarding which requirements are more heavily met than others.

The big picture when looking at the different categories, subcategories and government guidelines is, that the focus within government responses seems to be highly practical and information oriented. There seems to be less focus on empathetic content, but a prioritization of encouraging participation and contribution from the citizens could be found which means that the requirement of encouraging the citizens is met. The identified subcategories match up well with the stipulated guidelines when looking at details outlined within the government documents. As required by the central government, the responses can be said to contain many informational contents, make work-flows transparent and thus show that action has been taken to work on reported issues by the public. Also, the measures which were found within the government responses can be said to largely meet the government's expectations. The argumentative aspects which were dominated by references of laws, regulations and lawful acting, are also in line with the need for lawful behavior of the government agencies. Furthermore, an emphasis on policies and regulations in order to enhance credibility, trust and the people's knowledge could be seen. Only two subcategories that were found in the coded sample went against the guidelines. One directly, where responsibility was denied without providing further information, and another one indirectly, where responsibility was transferred without reason. Thus, the government's image conveyed through the responses aligns with the expected image the government agencies should convey. This is the image of a responsive government that stresses lawful behavior, actively handles reported issues, provides information and encourages participation. The desire to provide a positive image and the empirical evidence showing a successful portrayal of this image, can be explained with the theoretical concept of *Public Transcripts* according to which the more powerful actor strives to portray itself in that light.

When considering the application of the above statements, it is important to note that the responses have been analyzed independently and that the content of the submissions was not the focus of the analysis. The considerations of this are firstly that the relationship between the submission and the response was thus also not analyzed and the meaningfulness of the response to the submission is not covered in this thesis. Additionally, the frequency of subcategory appearance in the responses from the analyzed sample could have a direct relation to the types of submissions, and thus viewing the frequency of responses independent from the submissions might not provide a clear indication of government service quality. Another consideration is that submissions with no response have not been included in this data set. This is important since it is also apparent from the documents that not responding is not in line with the guidelines and this could not be assessed.

6.2. Integrating the Findings into the State of the Art

The findings generated with the qualitative analysis of Chinese government responses will now be integrated in the state of the art in order to locate the findings of this paper in this particular research field. By relating the findings of the analysis to the study of Distelhorst and Fu (2019), it was possible to show different manifestation of the government-citizen communication as *Public Transcripts* on the government side of the staged interaction. It could be shown which reoccurring categories and contents can be regarded as characteristic for government responses in China and to what extent these categories and subcategories are in line with the expected way of communication with the public, which is outlined by the central government in relevant documents.

Regarding other papers from the broad state of the art which proposed reasons for the usefulness of online complaint platforms in China, such as the benefit of information gain (e.g. Dimitrov 2015; Hartford 2005), the maintenance of the system's stability (e.g. Chen et al. 2016; Li 2014; Lorentzen 2013; O'Brien and Li 2006) or the strengthening of the system's stability (e.g. Lambach; Göbel 2010; Almén 2018), it can be said that the findings contribute to the understanding of these statements. This is because it can be seen how the Chinese government responds to its citizens in the context of the government's guidelines, which also resonate with the proposed reasons by the papers who put forward explanations for why these online complaint platforms are operated.

Concerning studies which focused on determinants of government responsiveness and aim to assess correlations between certain factors which could lead to more or less government responsiveness (e.g. Distelhorst and Hou 2017; Butler and Broockman 2011), the findings of this master thesis can be seen as a contribution which does not emphasize on determinants and correlative factors for responsiveness, but rather offer more insights into how the government responds in a comprehensive way. By purposely not taking into account correlations and causalities of responsiveness, this thesis offers a framework which could be employed in order to re-assess manifestations of government responsiveness in studies which assess determinants of government responsiveness. By utilizing the framework with its findings regarding government response components, it could for example be studied what determines a certain category or subcategory.

The findings in the form of different subcategories found in government responses which were discussed in the context of the outlined government guidelines can also be integrated into the narrow state of the art. The consulted papers that included an assessment of government responses served as the theoretical foundation for the different categories which could be expected to be found within government responses. The subcategories add more detailed information about the manifestation of these categories within responses from government agencies in China.

Some of the inductively identified subcategories show similarities and partial overlap with findings of the papers which belong to the narrow state of the art. Thus, the subcategories which were found inductively can be integrated and contextualized with already existing studies which assessed government responses from different angles. For instance, the subcategory *I4 Explanation* can be said to be related to the response mode “justification or explanation of the existing practice”, which could be found in Cai and Zhou’s (2019) study. A reflection of the explanation subcategory can also be found in Grohs et al.’s (2016) paper where offering additional information was an analytical category for government responses. Lastly, it is related to the response category “Direct Information” from Chen, Pan and Xu’s (2016) study.

I1 Contact Information was a part of the coding scheme of Grohs et al.’s (2016) paper under the sub-index service orientation. It was also apparent in Distelhorst and Hou’s (2017) paper where they coded a response as “helpful” when it contained amongst other aspects “contact information of relevant bureaucracies” (Distelhorst and Hou 2017: 1031). Distelhorst and Hou’s (2017) category can also be linked to the *I3 Responsibility Information* as it features both the aspect of contact information, and the aspect of relevant bureaucracies being mentioned in

government responses. The *I3 Responsibility Information* subcategory can furthermore be related to the category “Referral”, which was featured in Chen, Pan and Xu’s (2016) paper and indicated responses which referred to other responsible agencies.

When it comes to the *Argumentation and Justification Category*, the subcategory *A1 Regulations and Laws* can be said to be featured in Distelhorst and Hou’s (2017) paper as the criteria of offering relevant policy information in order to label a response as “helpful”. The *Outcome Category* was present in a more resolution-oriented form in Cai and Zhou’s (2019) paper within their categories regarding resolution of an issue and the promise of a resolution. In Distelhorst and Hou’s (2017) paper, the outcome aspect is implied because responses were categorized as “helpful” and “not helpful”.

Thus, the findings can be related back to the broad and narrow state of the art and can be said to resonate partly with what has already been found and assessed within government responses. There were also subcategories which could not directly be found to be resembled in the assessed literature. Thus, the new findings in the form of subcategories which have been generated through the analysis of this master thesis are an interesting addition to the already found categories by studies of the state-of-the-art literature. They shed more light on the manifestation of measures, informational content, the expression of empathy and emotion and different forms of argumentation and justification which can be found in Chinese online government responses to citizen appeals.

6.3. Proposing an Analytical Framework for Government Responses

With this master thesis, the generated findings through qualitative content analysis of a sample of 100 government responses can be regarded as the proposition of a new analytical framework which can be employed when looking at government responses in China. By covering different angles and analytical categories which were theoretically derived, it was aimed to provide a comprehensive and detailed coding guide which can be regarded as a condensed form of the different components of government responses in China.

By putting forward this new analytical framework which can be partly related back to the already existing state of the art literature in this research field, it is believed that it can enable researchers to take into consideration different aspects and coherences when attempting to work with data that includes government responses for further analysis. It is hoped that this framework can help in order to see details and components of government responses and gain more

in-depth insights into how the publicly staged communication which can be regarded as a *Public Transcript* between government and citizens manifests itself.

After relating the findings to the state of the art, it can be said that this framework differs in a few aspects from already conducted studies on government responses in general, and government responses in China. As the underlying research question of this paper did not have the goal to examine correlations and causalities, e.g. determinants of government responsiveness, and because there has been no underlying objective to assess the quality and evaluate government responses in a certain way, it can be said that this framework has the qualities of being rather general and unbiased by any other research objective than assessing different components of government responses.

The perspective taken when assessing the government responses was a focus on the textual parts, meaning on different semantically connected patterns which could be captured by applying summarizing qualitative content analysis in an inductive way. By doing so, the different components of government responses could be identified and incorporated into the final framework. The framework is the result of an approach that mixed deductive and inductive elements. Since the inductive approach was applied as well, more and new understanding of the nature of government responses in China could be gained.

This led to a level of complexity of the final analytical framework. It can be said to be useful in order to label components of government responses which allows an in-depth understanding of, for example, the most frequent measures that get referred to, certain ways of empathetic expressions which can be found across government responses, or different types of information provided within government responses. Due to the just outlined features, this framework is proposed as an analytical tool which could be further developed and employed for different research purposes that concern the analysis of government responses in China. Furthermore, it is also thinkable to apply this framework in an adjusted form to the analysis of government response in other countries.

6.4. Further Interpretation and Implications

Based on the results of the analysis, it can be discussed what the response contents imply for the relationship and responsiveness between different involved actors such as the central government, the responding agency, and the citizens. Furthermore, it is possible to assess who the responding government agencies are acting responsively to. Additionally, the government

image that gets conveyed, and possible incentives for the way the government agencies respond to citizen appeals, can be elaborated.

Firstly, the relationship with the citizens and the conveyed image for the citizens who receive the response will be discussed. The different response components their appearance imply that the government is actively working on the submitted issues, provides information and engages with the citizens on a personal level. Thus, the image that becomes apparent within the government responses is the image of a responsive and committed government that tackles problems, answers questions by providing information and deals with citizen appeals responsibly by following laws and regulations. As a result, it can be argued that citizens are treated as customers who receive seemingly meaningful responses to their concerns which could evoke positive feelings towards the government⁵⁴. If this was the case, the responses would contribute to more regime and local government legitimacy since it has been found that positive experiences with public services in China are beneficial for the regime legitimacy and trust towards the local governments (Chen 2017b). This is also confirmed by Wang et al. (2018) who point out that: “[...] what matters most to individual citizens is the local political ecology with which they live, day in and day out” (Wang et al. 2018: 131). This observed conveyed government image towards the citizens could oppose arguments made in the literature that the local governments often become subject of criticism by the people. This image is argued to lead to “[...] an image of “central good, local bad,” [...] (Chen 2017a: 625) and to more legitimacy for the central government (ibid.). Nevertheless, what was seldom found in government responses are expressions of empathy or apologies. The responding agencies rather justified existing practices and thus mitigated shortcomings of government work. This could on the other hand also evoke negative feelings towards the government and lead to a less positive image of a government that acts defensively and unempathetically when it comes to criticism of the work of certain government agencies.

The legitimacy differences between the central and local government in China is further related to the central-local government relationship, which has been subject of analysis in various studies (e.g. Cai and Zhu 2013; Donaldson 2016; Chen 2017a). Drawing on the findings of this thesis, the responses convey an image of a government agencies which are responding in alignment with central government documents. This has implications for the relationship between the central and the local government in China. In the literature, the principal-agent relationship

⁵⁴ Of course, this does not mean that they feel content with the response. Within this thesis, it cannot be examined whether the contents of the responses reflect reality and how satisfied the citizens were with the government's work.

is often described as problematic due to non-compliance of policy implementation on the local level. Thus, the local level is regarded as needing be controlled, disciplined and punished (Chung 2016: 153; Cai and Zhu 2013: 98). The analysis of this master thesis shows a different picture, as compliance with expectations from the central governments was found to be reflected within the government responses, which could indicate a central-local government relationship with a principal-agent relationship that shows compliance by the agent.

Lastly, possible underlying incentives for the way the local government responds to citizen appeals shall be discussed. Why would the government agencies respond in the way it has been found by the analysis of this master thesis? One aspect could be that the responses are made public and can thus be overseen not only by the citizens, but also by higher government levels which may lead to better governance of response on the local level. Another incentive could be that it is aimed to convey the image of a responsive government directly to the citizens in order to maintain social stability and positively contribute to local government legitimacy. Furthermore, a positive perception of the local government level by the citizens has been found to positively contribute to regime support (Chen 2017b) which could be a reason for why the central government puts a lot of emphasis on good practices when interacting with citizens on a local level. These arguments could be related to the finding by Chen et al. (2016) that local governments are responsive because they try to prevent social unrest on a local level which could be caused by collective action, and because they do not want that certain information reaches upper level governments. Regarding the found shortcoming of empathetic contents in government responses and the usage of justification instead, the incentive could be to maintain a positive government image and prevent it from losing face by fully admitting shortcomings. This image conveyed could also be chosen in order to impress or reassure potential readers from higher government levels.

6.5. Limitations

The conducted study, and thus the resulting framework, has some limitations that should be made transparent in order to fully understand the significance of the outlined findings. Due to the fact that for this master thesis it was not possible to assess a larger sample size than 100 responses, especially the quantitative assessments of the findings should be treated with caution. As the sample can be considered rather small, it is not possible to generalize these findings for all government responses in China or to regard them as representative for responses from the

whole country. Since the sample contains a regional bias, it is possible that the findings reflect this bias as well to some extent, even though the responses have not been found to be incoherent.

Another shortcoming is the limitation of missing intercoder reliability. It has not been possible to assign the task of individually coding the analyzed sample by another person using the same coding guide. Even though there has been consultation and discussion about the categories and the already coded sample, it is possible that some of the results reflect the personal bias of the author which has to be taken in mind when looking at the analytical framework and the results of this paper.

Over the inductive analysis process, it was found that broader definitions of subcategories would cause the subcategories or categories to overlap. Since it was decided that the identified subcategories cannot overlap in order to create a precise and distinguished framework, definitions had to be made in order to differentiate them from one another. The framework is a result of this categorization process. When interpreting the findings, it has to be noted that as a result, the categories have been defined to not overlap and that these definitions must be adhered to when applying the framework or interpreting the findings.

Furthermore, it has to be stated that the focus was mainly laid upon the contents and components of government responses. Thus, assumptions about the qualitative value for the submitter of the messages that got responded to, or an evaluation or weighting of the identified categories in any way is not possible at this stage of the research process. The findings can be regarded as rather descriptive, but that can also be seen as their strength in order to provide a basis for further research. Future studies could relate these findings in ways that lead to an evaluation of government responses in the sense of how good their quality can be said to be measured by the contents of citizen appeals.

7. Conclusion

For this master thesis, a qualitative summarizing content analysis on a random sample of 100 government responses from Chinese online complaint platforms was conducted in order to answer the question and its related sub-questions on **how the government responds to online submitted citizen appeals and what image it convey through the responses**. The online submitted complaints and their corresponding responses were viewed as *Public Transcripts*, which means that the observable communication between the government and the citizens is regarded as a staged and strategic interaction. In order to assess the government responses and develop an analytical framework, different categories were identified from already existing studies which assessed government responses. The detailed manifestations of these relatively broad categories were inductively found within the analyzed data by applying the *Grounded Theory* approach and the method of summarizing inductive qualitative content analysis. The result of the analysis was a coding guide with 6 categories and 26 subcategories. Based on the findings, the proposed research question and its four sub-questions could be answered.

Firstly, regarding the sub-question which was related to the identification of different analytical categories within the state of the art literature, it was found that by drawing on the narrow state of the art, the *Measure Category*, *Information Category*, *Argumentation and Justification Category*, *Outcome Category* and *Emotional and Empathy Category* could be identified. Additionally, the responses were inductively found to also have structural elements, which improved the readability and added a level of formality to the responses. This led to the addition of the *Structure Category*.

Secondly, regarding the sub-question of **how these largely deductively identified categories manifest themselves within government responses in China**, 26 different subcategories have been found within the analyzed random sample. These subcategories reflect different types of *Measures*, the majority being examination, handling, implementation and delegation; *Argumentation and Justifications*, which mainly consist of law related contents; *Information*, mostly in the form of explanations, followed by responsibility and contact information; *Emotional and Empathetic* expressions, including greetings, gratitude, encouragement and assurance; and finally *Outcomes* and *Structural* aspects. These findings imply a focus on the provision of information, taking action in line with law, outlining responsibilities and encouraging the submitters to make use of the online complaint platforms.

The two sub-questions of **how coherent the findings of government response components are with the assessed guidelines stipulated by central government documents and the state-of-the-art literature** have also been answered. It was found that the identified subcategories largely reflected the outlined requirements by the central government. Propositions such as providing a high level of information, referencing laws or legal aspects, taking measures in a lawful way, outlining of responsibilities, and the encouragement of citizen participation, were all found and demonstrated in the analyzed sample of government responses. After integrating the findings of this master thesis into the state of the art, it was found that they can be regarded as a valuable addition to the already existing assessments of government responsiveness in China. Some of the inductively found subcategories have been already pointed out by other studies which assessed government responses, but the majority are new findings which contribute to shedding more light on the nature of government responses in China and enable more in-depth understanding of the staged government-citizen interaction which becomes observable online.

These achieved results make it possible to provide a comprehensive answer to the main research question of **how the Chinese government responds to citizen appeals and what image the government conveys through the responses**. The categories and their frequency of appearance suggest a response style which is focused on providing information, outlining measures and focusing on transparency when it comes to responsibilities of certain tasks. Law related content and regulations are featured heavily, whereas the reference of party ideology seems to have a subordinate role. On an inter-personal level, citizens are encouraged to participate, and it is explicitly stated that their role is to supervise the government work which places the citizens in a position to provide relevant information about issues crucial for the government. At the same time, by receiving responses which imply the handling of the reported issues, they are encouraged to utilize the online complaint system to their benefit. However, the responses lack empathetic contents and acknowledgement of shortcomings, which could be due to the incentive of maintaining a good image of the work of criticized government agencies. Furthermore, these found response subcategories seem to be largely aligned with the central government propositions which state what is expected from the operation of the online complaint platforms.

Based on the findings which show how the government responds to citizen appeals, further interpretation regarding the conveyed government image within the responses, which were seen as a *Public Transcript*, was possible. The conveyed image by the government shows it in a positive and responsive light, which is aligned with the proposition that the more powerful actor

strives to show itself without flaws. This explanation is also related to the image of a government that largely complies with central government guidelines by diligently responding to citizen appeals in the form of providing information, acting lawfully in response to reported issues, and encouraging participation; but not expressing too much sympathy towards the submitters. It has been found that flaws of the system or government work did not get revealed or discussed within the analyzed government responses. This is also not a requirement that could be found in the central government documents and thus, it can be argued that by complying with the regulations, the government agencies also reflect the expected image from the central government which assumingly would also not be interested in a negative depiction of the government, as it is expressed that trust and regime legitimacy should be fostered.

This way of responding has implications for the government-citizen and the local-central government relationship. It is argued that the way of responding to citizens, who were found to be treated as customers, in a service oriented way could evoke positive feelings on the citizen's side towards the government which could have a positive impact on regime and local government legitimacy. Additionally, the image that gets conveyed towards the central government is the image of a complying government, which could be a sign of a positive principal-agent relationship. This interpretation opposes findings from other studies, which described the central-local government and citizen-local government relationship as often problematic. As a final remark on the generated findings, it is argued that this paper has contributed to the existing state of the art in deepening the understanding how the government responds to citizen appeals on online complaint platforms in the form of *Public Transcripts*. The findings are directly building on already existing approaches on how to analyze government responses, and furthermore provide a new framework with richer categories and a more generalized applicability for future research.

It can be argued that these findings could be an incentive for further deepening the understanding of government responsiveness in China by assessing for example correlations of certain elements of responses with different types of submissions. Extending the research and testing and improving the proposed framework could lead to findings with statistical significance, which could be achieved through employing technologies such as supervised or semi-supervised machine learning. Another study which could be interesting to conduct is to perform an in-depth analysis of certain subcategories and their meaning for government responsiveness. Furthermore, engaging in assessing and exploring the meaning and quality of government responsiveness in China by analyzing the quality and value of responses for the citizens, which

is suggested to be measured by the contents of the submission that receives the response, is a research field that offers plenty of opportunities to be discovered and worked on more.

Finally, the conducted study also has limitations which need to be considered when looking at the findings. Firstly, the sample size can be regarded as rather limited due to time factors and even though theoretical saturation could be achieved, it is still possible that within a larger dataset more subcategories could be identified, and the framework further developed. Thus, it cannot be claimed that the findings have statistical significance or are generalizable. Also, intercoder reliability could not be provided as giving the task of independently coding the analyzed sample to another person was not possible.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Coding Guide

Structure Category			
The Structure Category is an inductively identified category which has the subcategory S1 Structure and serves the purpose of capturing whether structural elements could be found within a government response. Only textual parts which can be regarded as rather redundant for the content of the response and serving a structuring function were subsumed in this category.			
Subcategory	Definition	Example	Coding rules
S1 Structure	Parts which serve a structuring purpose of a response will be coded with S1 Structure	彭女士：你好，你关于“工伤鉴定下来后公司拖延赔付应该怎样维护合法权益”（阳光重庆网 85626号）的来信已转至我局，现就你所提出问题回复如下：经查你老公蒋先生所在单位于9月到我局办理了除一次医疗补助金外的相关待遇，我局已按规定和流程审核完毕(1)	Structuring purposes: - Splitting response up - Referring to the submitted request again, citing the title of it - Department names at the end of a response - Introductions of a response - Claiming the response has been received
Measure Category			
The Measure category includes parts which refer to a measure in form of an action which has been undertaken by any actor. The identified measures will be additionally coded with time aspects: past, now and future. If measures have been taken, work is still in progress, or it will be done, that part will be coded with Mx+p/n/f+a/b. a and b refer to the acting party: a: responding department undertook measure. b:			

other actor undertook measure. If the time aspect or actor aspect is unknown, it will be replaced with an x.

Regarding the time aspect, if it is not sure if something has already happened, it will be coded with future. Only if it is clear from the context that a measure has been taken, it will be coded with **past**. Measures which are a part of an explanation or informational part which do not necessarily belong to the concrete measures related to the submission will not be coded as measures

Subcategory	Definition	Example	Coding rules
M1+p/n/f +a/b Delegation	If a task or further step is/was/will be delegated to another department, person or unit, or if another department, unit or person is/was/will be contacted with a task, it will be coded with M1+p/n/f+a/b	[...] 最近一段时间我们都在与上级部门联系，要求尽快拨付相关款项， [...] (1) M1na 你所反映的问题我责成市供热和燃气办进行了调查核实 (14) M1pa	Initiated contact with another (only one) department/actor in order to delegate further steps. If a measure is delegated, the delegation part will be coded first, and the delegated measure will be separately coded with the separate respective measure category. Criteria: - Delegation to another actor - Applies for actors including police officers and investigation groups of the responding department Difference to M8 Transfer to another department: - M8: here the whole submission gets forwarded to another department which is why it will not be coded with M1+p/n/f+a/b Difference to M9 Measure enforcement: - M9 indicates that the task is being enforced by the department or another actor. This can get apparent through context or words

			used, it looks similar to parts coded as M1 Delegation: 为此，民警向工地负责人做出了警告，要求其做出整改。(37) The first bold part was coded as Measure enforcement. The police went to warn the persons and required rectification. As 要求 does not mean that they just asked for rectification, it was not coded as Delegation.
M2+p/n/f+a/b Examination	If a case or circumstances around it is/was/will be examined, it will be coded with M2+p/n/f+a/b	你所反映的问题我责成市供热和燃气办进行了调查核实。(14) M2pb 我局华大中队已介入，现正在调查中(26) M2na	Criteria and included - Contact with other department or person in order to gain information, - further insight - examination of a situation on the spot - verification of a situation - consultation of other actors to gain more information - examination of material
M3+p/n/f+a/b Contact with submitter	If contact with the submitter was/will be initiated outside of the platform, it will be coded with M3+p/n/f+a/b	在电话中了解到蒋先生未在原单位上班了 (1) M3pa	If the respondent initiated or will initiate contact with the submitter, it will be coded with M3+p/n/f+a/b Also, if contact has been implied (for example if departments made effort to go on the spot and talk to the submitter), it will be coded with M3+p/n/f+a/b. If it was familiarized about the situation with the submitter, the entire section will be coded as M3 Contact

			with submitter and not examination additionally: 接到投诉后我们联系投诉人，了解具体情况。(97)
M4+p/n/f/+a/b Implementation	If there was/is/will be any concrete steps which imply a concrete implementation of a measure, it will be coded with M4+p/n/f+a/b	路灯电源箱变建设由于涉及技术标准，行业规范要求，我公司多次协调长沙电业局，并报请李军市长后 (25) M4pb	Criteria: - Concrete step/measure - Has to be defined - Has to be in relation to the submitted complaint - Not part of an explanation - Not a past and unrelated action being part of an explanation
M5+p/n/f+a/b Handling	If an issue was/is/will be dealt with, if they have been processed (处理) it will be coded with M5+p/n/f+a/b Handling	铁岭新城泰信市政设施维护有限公司排水所赵所长回复说：现已派维护工作人员前去处理。(24) M5fb 我局会继续依法对其跟踪处理。 (case 33) M5fa 目前，市天然气公司已采取多重措施 (14) M5nb 予以解决 (28)	If a case has been dealt with and the responder referred to it with for example “处理” but it is not further specified what has been done, it will be coded with M5+p/n/f+a/b Criteria: - No further specification - Statement that it is/will be/was dealt with without further information - Max degree of information: adjective with the measure: taking protective measures, taking helpful measures “Effective measure” “Measures” “Solving a problem” 予以解决 (28)

			Difference to Assurance: “Government will enhance service” → Assurance “Management will be strengthened” → Handling
M6+p/n/f+a/b Mediation	If there was/is/will be mediation between the submitter and the conflicting party, it will be coded with M6+p/n/f+a/b Mediation	界集镇也积极与诉求人沟通协调处理此事，(67) M6pb	Mediation implies that the submitter has an issue with another actor and the contacted department put effort into mediating/resolving/communicating between the two parties. Mediation overrules other measures which could potentially be found within the Mediation part If the action of contacting can be identified as a mediation process and not as a delegation of a task to other parties than the conflict party and the complaining party, it will be coded with M6
M7+p/n/f+a/b Coordination	If different departments are/were/will be coordinated in order to work together on a problem. If other responsible agencies or departments are mentioned in a way that implies shared work or responsibility, that part will be coded with M7+p/n/f+a/b.	并与深圳市人居环境委员会及龙华新区等部门协调有关事项，(42) M7pa	In order to prevent overlap with M1+p/n/f+a/b Delegation: - If task gets assigned: Task has to be assigned to at least 2 actors - The responding party can be part of the coordination - Semantically: 协调 cannot be used as an indicator because sometimes it is a task which only gets delegated to one actor: 最后，为确保万无一失，我们又协调安装施工单位 (30) This part will thus be coded as M1+p/n/f+a/b Delegation If the coordination is followed by a measure that has been coordinated, it will be coded separately.

M8+p/n/f+a/b Transfer to another department	If the issue was/will be transferred to another department by the consulted department	您留言反映的问题已交由旁海镇、湾水镇办理。(39) M8pa	Only if the transfer is conducted by the responding party it will be coded with M8+p/n/f+a/b
M9+p/n/f+a/b Enforcement	If it is claimed that laws are/will be enforced, the part will be coded with M9+p/n/f+a/b	将严格按照交通执法规范对此路段的交通 (19) M9fa	If law is actively enforced by an actor for instance by referring to handling situations according to law Also, if measures are enforced, the respective parts were coded as M9 Measure enforcement. The enforced measures were not coded as M9 and further split up If the action itself can be regarded as law or measure enforcement, it will be coded altogether as M9, as for example: 届时执法人员将第一时间到现场处置. (20) “处置” can be translated as handled, but it implies the law enforcement and was not coded separately. Unlike this example: 责令其立即改正宣传用语 (21): here the bold part was coded as M9, the enforced measure as implementation. M9 takes priority over other measures such as mediation: 并责令

			烧烤摊主经营时避免高声喧哗，否则就取缔摊位 (41) M6pb M9 is different from M1 Delegation. If a measure is enforced and not just delegated which gets apparent from context and wording, it will not be coded as delegation even though to some extent it could also be regarded as a delegation of a task which another actor has to do.
Outcome Category The outcome category refers to outcomes from measures and solution prospects or already achieved solutions. The Outcome will be supplemented with a time aspect, either past or future. Measures will be prioritized over the outcome category			
O1+p/f Result	Results of measures being taken will be coded with O1+p/f. In order to be coded with O1t, the part has to come after a measure that has been taken.	经查你老公蒋先生所在单位于 9 月到我局办理了除一次医疗补助金外的相关待遇 (1) O1p Result 经我街道工作人员进一步现场调查核实，诉求件中所描述地点未发现违规建筑物。此外，该地点位于永和塑胶有限公司厂区内，驾校负责人提供营业执照一	If there are findings which are the result of an investigative measure, it will be coded with O1+p/f instead of I4 Explanation. (example: 主要是由于前几天室外温度极低，加之诉求人小区入住率低造成温度短期低。(56) → in this case the explanation is the result of an investigation which is why it was coded with O1p. If the outcome of a measure is another measure, it will be coded as the measure and not as the outcome in order to prevent information loss about the measures that have been taken. The exception to this rule is if the outcome includes measures which

		份，及向永和塑胶责任有限公司租赁场地合同， (35) O1p Result	serve informational purpose and can be regarded as not related to a measure being taken as response to the submission.
Argumentation & Justification Category This category contains parts of a response which serve argumentative purposes like explanations or referencing laws and regulations which explain circumstances			
A1 Regulations and Laws	Parts where laws and regulations with their implications for the submitter are cited or where there is a reference to law will be coded with A1 Regulations and Laws	如为单位职工，应 按照《西安市城镇职工基本医疗保险暂行办法》（市政发[1999]138号）的规定，参加我市城镇职工基本医疗保险，享受我市城镇职工基本医疗保险待遇 (3) 我局会继续依法对其跟踪处理。 (3) 严格按照政策规定和征收方案规定进行拆迁。(6)	Minimal Conditions: - Citation - Reference Everything that belongs content-wise to regulations or law will be coded with A1 Regulations and Laws. If an action is claimed to be according to law, it will be coded with A1 Regulations and Laws. A1 Regulations and laws overrules I4 Explanation which means the textual part which is referring to a law will always be coded, even if part of an explanation. I4 Explanation will be used additionally if A1 Laws and regulations is further specified. The keywords which imply regulations and laws will be used to identify this category. Simple standards are not taken into account such as 25:

			路灯电源箱变建设由于涉及技术标准，行业规范要求 Here everything was coded as I4 Implementation
A2 Lack of information from submitter	If there is further information needed in order to handle the submissions it will be used for coding	您投诉的问题表述过于模糊 [...] (32)	If there is a lack of information and the responder claims to not able to respond or if there are doubts expressed which need to be clarified, it will be coded with A2
A3 Party Principles	If it is argued with party principles and ideology related, it will be coded with A3	本着以人民为中心的理念和“尊重历史、面对现实、实事求是、便民利民、维护稳定”的原则 (47)	If the argumentation is backed with party principles, it will be coded with A3. 65: 按照“属地管理、分级负责”原则，is not a party principle because it is part of a law text, thus this was coded as A1 Regulations and Laws
A4 Responsibility denied without further reference	If the responsibility of the department is denied without giving further information about departments which are responsible for the matter	lwh2 网友您好： 柳叶湖大桥的管理权目前还未移交给柳叶湖管委会管理。柳叶湖热线办 (43)	Since only one special case was found: no further coding rules
Information Category Every part that offers information as below specified to the submitter will be assigned to this coding category.			
I1 Contact information	If any sort of further contact information is given, e.g. phone number, address,	并邀请了西安音乐学院的两名教授担任面试官。面试成绩现	If contact information has been given, only the part containing the contact information will be coded with I1 Contact information

		场进行了宣布，且考生进行了签字确认。此次面试，市人社局也派出了巡视人员，与团市委纪检组现场全程监督，面试不存在违纪违规问题。 如您还有其他疑问，请致电市人社局事业处咨询，电话：86786869。(8)	
I2 Advice	Further information that is advising the citizen to do something will be coded with I2.	请你将身份证、社会保障卡（需要到卡对应的银行去激活银行功能）复印后交与单位后 (1) 可在户籍所在地的社区劳动保障工作站办理相关参保事宜 (3)	Criteria: - Information implies further effort for the submitter - Advises to undertake further steps - Needs to contain detailed information, not just information about wrong responsibility When the submission Is not answered and instead it is transferred to another department, it will be coded with M8 Transfer to other department. Since it could be also regarded as a further step the citizen has to take, in such a case it will not be coded with I2 Advice because it is a step which does not go beyond

			the level of bringing up issues at certain departments. Different from I3: if encouraged to turn to other department: responsibility information, not advice. Difference E3 Encouragement: If encouraged to call the bureau: Encouragement, not advice
I3 Responsibility information	If responsibility information is given where the citizen can turn to, it will be coded with I3	劳动争议方面的投诉举报由市劳动保障监察部门负责直接处理，处理结果也由该部门保管、入档，(case 65) 尊敬的网友：您好！感谢您对我区城市管理工作的支持与来信。对于您所反映的住宅楼改成商业用途的问题，建议转市住建局（2118186）等相关部门处理；关于商铺客人噪音扰民问题，建议网友向环保（7830996）等	- The Responsibility Information is not further specified: no further advice is given - Information about responsibilities for a certain problem

		相关部门反映。 (20)	
I4 Explanation	If further explanation of why a problem exists, background information regarding a certain circumstance is given, it will be coded with I4 Explanation	按照征收补偿方案规定：对有房屋产权申报登记手续或落实私房政策文件，但由于历史原因未办理产权证，或者有土地使用证、土地租赁证，但无房屋修建审批手续的住房，按该房屋建筑面积的 95%给予产权置换或者货币补偿。对没有土地使用手续和房屋修建手续的自建房屋，修建年代较久，有户籍的，按该房屋建筑面积的 80%给予产权置换或者货币补偿 (6)	If there is background information given, it will be coded with I4 Explanation. If the information and explanation is part of a finding, it will be coded with O1 Result If a legal argument is used to explain a problem, the legal reference will be separately coded with A1 Regulations and laws
Emotional and Empathy Category			

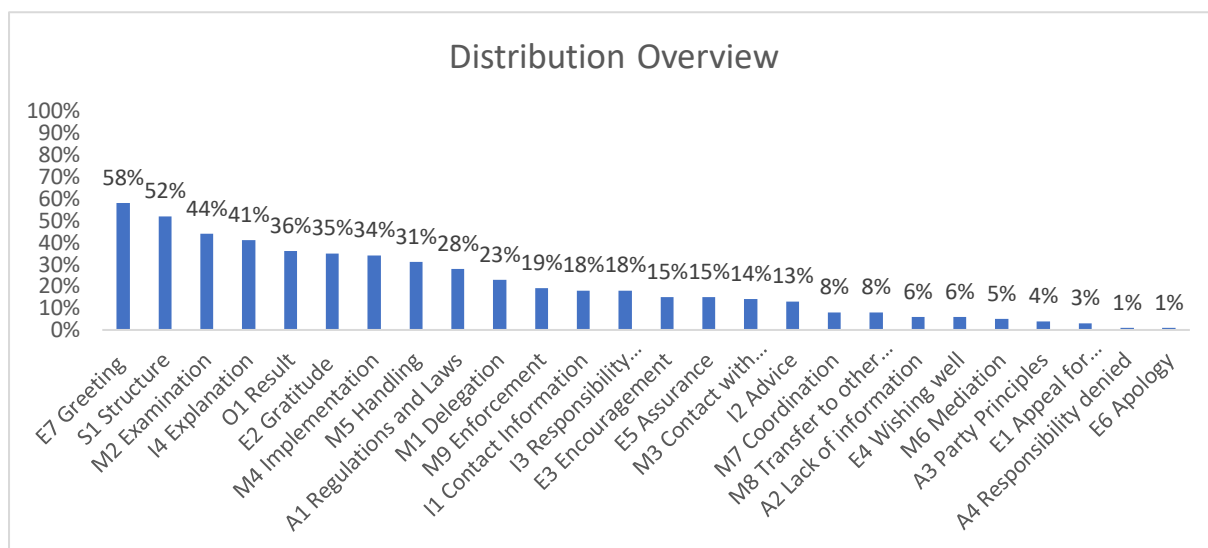
Parts of a response which express emotion or empathy will be coded as a part of the Emotional and Empathy category.			
E1 Appeal for understanding	If a response contains an appeal for understanding, it will be coded with E1	但因为市局人员、岗位调整，9月的待遇用款至今未拨付到我局，所以暂未支付，最近一段时间我们都在与上级部门联系，要求尽快拨付相关款项，款项一到我们立即支付，给你带来不便，敬请理解和支持。在电话中了解到蒋先生未在原单位上班了，请你将身份证、社会保障卡（需要到卡对应的银行去激活银行功能）复印后交与单位后，(1)	If matters are not being resolved or improved, phrases which ask for the submitter's understanding/support will be coded with E1.
E2 Gratitude	If there are phrases that contain gratitude towards the submission, they will be coded with E2	对南坝电影院观众厅内部进行彻底改造维修，逐步完善电影院设施和功能，跟上	Gratitude expressed only towards the submitter

		文化大繁荣的步伐，再次感谢市民对宣汉文化广电事业的关注和支持 (10)	
E3 Encouragement	If the submitter is encouraged to further engage with the platform, it will be coded with E3	如您仍有疑问，请详细提供相关情况并留下有效联系方式，以便工作人员进行核对。感谢您对我们工作的支持，欢迎您继续监督和支持我们的工作。 (11) 您好，对您反映的问题，莱西市政府进行了落实，依据日庄镇教师课时量计算办法，所有参评教师均达课时量。参评人员近五年任课情况均由所在学校提供，任课课目及课时由校长及分管教学领导加盖	If the respondent encourages the submitter to further engage in any sort of contact, mostly within the ending-Structure Part Only if the department encourages to further get in touch with them it will be coded with E3 and not with I2 Advise. 您好！我们需要进一步了解其他详细情况才能作出明确答复，请留下联系方式或挂我们咨询电话 87670272，感谢您的支持！ (57) in this case: I2 Advise because it is a further step to resolving the issue which was not possible due to lack of information.

		公章签字确认。 如您仍有疑问，请详细提供相关情况并留下有效联系方式，以便工作人员进行核对。感谢您对我们工作的支持，欢迎您继续监督和支持我们的工作。(11)	
E4 Wishing well	If there are good wishes, that part will be coded with E4 wishing well	祝好 (30)	Wishing well towards the submitter
E5 Assurance	If the response contains a part with reassures the submitter that they take the complaint or issue seriously	您所反映的问题，我局交管部门十分重视 (34)	下一步，我局将继续对该事件进行关注，(42) In this case, 关注 is not coded as a measure, this part rather shows assurance to the submitter that the responding department will continue to care about that issue.
E6 Apology	If the response contains a part which indicates that the responding party is apologizing for inconveniences to the submitter, the respective part will be coded as E6 Apology	对此我们深表歉意 (88)	Apologizing to the submitter

E7 Greeting	If a response contains a greeting towards the submitter, the respective part will be coded as E7 Greeting	您好！我局已对2#架空层的违建行为下发了限期整改通知单，要求其限期自行拆除，我局会继续依法对其跟踪处理。(2)	Greetings were defined as the mentioning of the submitter's name and official greeting phrases.
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Appendix 2: Category Distribution



(Source: Dataset)

Appendix 3: Abstract in English and German

English Abstract

The Chinese online complaint system enables citizens to interact with government agencies and put forward suggestions, recommendations, questions, and complaints regarding various topics. The government-citizen communication is in many cases publicly accessible online, which enables researchers to study this staged interaction between citizens and an authoritarian government that can be viewed as a *Public Transcript*. The way the government presents itself online has implications on the citizen-government relationship with regards to regime legitimacy. So far, there exists only scarce research that gives more insights into the nature and typical components of government responses. This master thesis contributes to fill this research gap. It tackles the question of how the Chinese government responds online to citizen appeals, and furthermore how these findings can be contextualized regarding their coherence with central government guidelines and already existing findings from the state-of-the-art literature. By drawing on findings of the state of the art, primarily deductively derived categories were established with a focus on response contents, which are measures, outcomes, information, argumentation, emotion, and structural aspects. Over the course of the qualitative content analysis of a random sample of 100 government responses, different manifestations of these aforementioned categories in the form of reoccurring patterns were inductively identified and subsumed into 26 subcategories. The outcome of this analysis is an analytical framework, which can serve as the basis for future research to assess government responsiveness in China. It could be found that the government agencies convey the image that they are largely complying with central government guidelines by diligently responding to citizen appeals in the form of providing information, acting lawfully in response to reported issues and encouraging participation. However, not much sympathy towards the submitters is expressed. These findings are aligned with the proposition of the *Public Transcript* approach, which stipulates that the more powerful actor strives for depicting themselves in a positive light. The implications of these findings are a potentially positive impact on regime and government legitimacy, and the central-local government principal-agent relationship.

Keywords: *China – Online Complaint Platforms – Government Responsiveness – Government-Citizen Communication – Analytical Framework – Public Transcripts – Central-Local Government Relationship*

Deutscher Abstract

Das online Beschwerdesystem in China ermöglicht es den chinesischen BürgerInnen, mit den Regierungsbehörden in Kontakt zu treten und Vorschläge, Empfehlungen, Fragen und Beschwerden bezüglich verschiedener Themen vorzubringen. Die Kommunikation zwischen der Regierung und den BürgerInnen ist in vielen Fällen öffentlich online einsehbar, was eine Möglichkeit für die Forschung bietet, die inszenierte Interaktion zwischen BürgerInnen und einem autoritären Regime zu untersuchen. Diese beobachtbare Kommunikation zwischen den BürgerInnen und der Regierung wird als *Public Transcript* betrachtet. Eine Untersuchung dieser Interaktionen hat Relevanz, da die Art der online Inszenierung der Regierung Implikationen für die Beziehung zwischen den BürgerInnen und der Regierung hinsichtlich der Regimelegitimität hat. Jedoch gibt es bisher nur wenig Forschung über die Art und Weise, wie die chinesische Regierung auf Gesuche der BürgerInnen antwortet. Genau dieser Frage widmete sich diese Masterarbeit. Durch das Zurückgreifen auf den Forschungsstand wurden primär deduktiv hergeleitete Kategorien aufgestellt, welche sich auf Maßnahmen, Ergebnisse, Informationen, Argumentationen, Emotion und Struktur beziehen. Im Laufe der Inhaltsanalyse einer Zufallsstichprobe von 100 Regierungsantworten wurden verschiedene Manifestationen dieser Kategorien in der Form von sich wiederholenden Mustern induktiv identifiziert und in 26 Unterkategorien eingeordnet. Das Ergebnis dieser Analyse ist ein analytisches Rahmenkonzept, welches als Basis für zukünftige Forschung zur Untersuchung von Regierungsresponsivität in China verwendet werden kann. Zusätzlich wurden diese Ergebnisse mit Richtlinien der Zentralregierung und den Einsichten bereits existierender Forschung kontextualisiert und diskutiert. Durch die Analyse und Interpretation wurde gefunden, dass die Regierungsbehörden das Bild vermitteln, sich in ihren Antworten größtenteils an die Richtlinien der Zentralregierung zu halten. Dies geschieht durch Antworten, die Informationen bereitstellen, die rechtmäßige Behandlung von vorgebrachten Problemen beschreiben und zur Partizipation ermutigen. Jedoch wird wenig Empathie gegenüber der einreichenden Person ausgedrückt. Diese Ergebnisse passen zu der These des *Public Transcript* Ansatzes, welche besagt, dass der mächtigere Akteur danach strebt, sich in der Kommunikation in einem positiven Licht zu präsentieren. Als Schlussfolgerung dieser Ergebnisse werden mögliche positive Auswirkungen auf die Regime- und Regierungslegitimität und auf die Prinzipal-Agent Beziehung zwischen der Zentral- und Lokalregierung postuliert.

Schlagwörter: *China – Online Beschwerdeplattform – Regierungsresponsivität – Kommunikation zwischen Regierung und BürgerInnen – Analytisches Rahmenkonzept – Public Transcripts – Zentral-Lokalregierungsbeziehung*