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Rightful resistance: How do digital platforms achieve policy change?

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ABSTRACT

Many digital platforms have disrupted not only the market but also public policies. Platform companies have been shown to employ various political strategies such as lobbying and petitions to change restrictive policies. However, previous literature has failed to consider the unique nature of digital platforms, which involve actors across multiple sides of the platform, and its influence on platforms companies' political tactics. This paper aims to address how the multi-sided nature of digital platforms impacts the way they achieve policy change. This paper conducts a case study of how Chinese ride-hailing companies facilitated the enactment of a new, favourable national policy in 2016. Drawing on the literature of contentious politics, it finds that policy change can be achieved via rightful resistance, through which digital platforms leverage divisions within the multi-sided digital platform and within the government to push the frontiers of what is politically permitted. In the context of digital platforms, rightful resistance means (1) seeking support from powerful third parties, (2) using the rhetoric of the central policies, and (3) co-opting the incumbents.

1. Introduction

Digital platforms, such as Uber and Airbnb, have disrupted not only the existing market but also current public policies, and therefore, they have been striving for policy change in their own favor [1,2]. Research has shown that digital platform companies have attempted to exert policy influence through a wide range of channels, including lobbying, grassroots mobilization, and political campaign contributions, and have achieved various policy outcomes as a result [3–6]. However, despite these revealing findings, the current literature is predominantly based on the conventional lens of corporate political strategies, which fails to consider the unique nature of digital platforms and how it enables or constrains their political influence. Extant studies have demonstrated that digital platforms are different from traditional businesses in that they create value by connecting multiple sides of actors rather than by producing and selling goods or services themselves [7–10]. Therefore, the question is: how does this multi-sided feature of digital platforms influence the way they achieve policy change?

To answer this question, this paper combines insights from the literature on multi-sided digital platforms and contentious politics. Specifically, it employs the concept of rightful resistance to explicate the policy change process [11], emphasizing the divisions within both the multi-sided digital platforms and the state. On the one hand, multi-sided digital platforms are inherently characterized by a struggle among actors at different sides of the platform who have divergent interests. On the other hand, different government agencies prioritize different objectives, such that what is deemed illegitimate by one agency may be acceptable or even supported by another. This paper argues that, contrary to prior studies which assume that divisions among actors on digital platforms are a challenge, these divisions actually present an opportunity for platform companies to strategically align the divergent interests of actors with those of governments. By doing so, platform companies can establish political legitimacy and enact policy changes.

Empirically, this paper conducts an in-depth case study of the political battle of ride-hailing companies in China between 2014 and 2016. Like their counterparts in the U.S., Chinese ride-hailing companies have challenged the existing taxi policies and battled restrictive government measures. As a result, the new industry was seeking to create a new, favourable policy. Moreover, this case provides a natural comparative setting: The national draft policy published in October 2015 had many sections that were unfavourable to the ride-hailing industry, whereas the policy adopted in July 2016 underwent a significant adjustment that was more favourable to the emerging industry. This paper tries to explore the causes of the contrasting policy outcomes. This study discovers that ride-hailing companies in China were able to change the policy in their favor by employing three rightful resistance strategies: (1) seeking support from powerful third parties in the government, (2) using the rhetoric of the central policies, and (3) co-opting the incumbent industry.

This study offers several contributions to the literature. Firstly, it enhances our understanding of multi-sided digital platforms by emphasizing

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that the inherent conflicts arising from actors engaged across different sides of the platform can present an opportunity for platform companies to establish legitimacy with various stakeholders. Secondly, it extends existing research on digital politics and the policy influence of digital platforms by highlighting the distinctive characteristics of these platforms. Finally, the study speaks to research on corporate political activities, demonstrating that the government is not a homogeneous entity but rather comprises a range of diverse agencies and agendas.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Multi-sided digital platforms

Digital platforms are online tools that enable users with complementary needs to interact with each other [see review [12-14]. They are different from traditional businesses in that they facilitate interactions between multiple groups of users and create greater value than what each individual user could achieve alone [9,15,16]. In this sense, digital platforms can be seen as an ecosystem that consists of various actors, such as developers, users, service providers, and other third-party contributors; in the ecosystem, the platform owner typically provides core infrastructure, logistics, and rules to govern interactions between different actors [17,18]. In particular, the concept of multi-sided platforms was raised to refer to a situation where two or more parties interact on the platform [19]. The platform relinquishes ownership of the goods or services being exchanged but only helps facilitate transactions between buyers and sellers [8,20]. To provide concrete examples, the Uber platform is composed of two sides: the riders and the drivers, Airbnb operates as a platform that connects apartment suppliers with consumers seeking rental accommodations, while Amazon Marketplace is a platform that facilitates transactions between buyers seeking to purchase goods and sellers offering their products for sale [20,21]. These multi-sided market platforms not only improve market efficiency, which includes increasing the number of transactions and better matching supply and demand [14], they can also foster innovation by providing a space for developers and entrepreneurs to build and test new products and services [22–24].

Recent scholarship has increasingly recognized the inherent tussle in multi-sided digital platforms, where different actors and stakeholders have competing interests and resist the rules, standards, and policies that govern platform use [25]. Much of the current literature treats these conflicting interests and resulting resistance as a challenge for digital platform companies, which have to negotiate with stakeholders to find solutions. For example, Eaton et al. [26] showed how Apple, despite intending to maintain complete control over its iOS system, was forced to compromise with a network of stakeholders, including regulators, app developers, and end-users, in making its platform policies. Wen and Yue [27] found that in ride-hailing platforms, the interests of riders and platform owners are not aligned, with riders advocating for stricter safety measures and owners resisting them. Mohlmann and his colleagues [28,29] conducted interviews and surveys among ride-hailing drivers and discovered a tension between matching drivers with jobs and controlling their behavior through algorithms. External stakeholders also impact digital platforms. Zuboff [30,31] shed light on public resistance to platforms collecting vast amounts of user data without users' awareness or consent. Similarly, Klein et al. [32] examined how different stakeholders perceived and responded to Google Glass, and how public controversies around privacy concerns and social acceptance contributed to its failure.

While it is commonly assumed that this inherent tussle and resistance in multi-sided digital platforms pose a challenge for platform companies, this paper argues that these competing interests also present an opportunity for companies to form alliances and establish legitimacy in a wider context. Specifically, in the face of political backlash, digital platform companies can strategically leverage the different groups of actors in the multi-sided market platforms to push for policy change and gain resonance with different government agencies and initiatives. To describe this concept, the paper introduces the concept of rightful resistance, which originated in studies of contentious politics. The next section will discuss the political crackdown facing digital platforms and platform companies' responses, followed by an elaboration of the concept of rightful resistance.

2.2. Digital platforms' policy influence

Extensive research has shown that digital platforms have effectively leveraged corporate political strategies to promote their interests and shape policy outcomes. For example, Atal's [33] research revealed that Silicon Valley's political clout stems from its ability to shape political discourse via its control over digital platforms. Popiel's [34] study of tech lobbying emphasized the importance of understanding the contours of new media elite lobbying power, particularly in the context of regulating digital platforms. Van Doorn, Mos, and Bosma's [35] research re-examined the idea of platformization, highlighting the political implications of digital platforms' market power and their role in shaping social and economic relations. Additionally, Yates [4] showed how digital platforms engage in legitimation tactics, such as portraying their operations as innovative and disruptive and their workers as independent entrepreneurs, in order to establish their legitimacy in the eyes of the public, policymakers, and other stakeholders.

Recently, many studies have drawn attention to the fact that many digital platforms are operating in a regulatory void where the conventional measures of public policy can no longer apply to their new mode of delivering products or services [36]. For instance, Uber is not compatible with taxi policies and Airbnb does not fit into hotel policies. Although such a regulatory void allowed for rapid expansion of the platforms in the early stages by avoiding time-consuming government approval, it has resulted in increased resistance and punishment from various government agencies as the platforms scale up and draw more attention [2,37,38]. Therefore, in order to guarantee their long-term success and capacity to continue operating, digital platforms demand permanent policy change [39]. This stream of research, on the one hand, it has looked at how these governments responded to the emergence of digital platforms. For instance, Thelen [40] discovered that the entry of Uber triggered different political conflicts and, consequently, different policy outcomes in the U.S., Germany, and Sweden. Similarly, Cartwright [41] adopted the lens of historical institutionalism to explain the policy outcome of Uber in Maryland. Paik, Kang and Seamans [10] found that varying levels of political competition can account for ride-hailing bans imposed by U.S. city governments.

On the other hand, the current scholarship has investigated the strategies adopted by digital platforms to change public policies in these countries. For example, Baron [3] identified Uber's dual-purpose strategy, which can benefit the company both in the market and non-market arena in the U.S. Wen and Yue [27] illustrated the significant influence of platform user mobilization on policy outcomes in the U.S. Uzuncan, Rigtering and Ozcan [6] demonstrated how Uber and Airbnb used a mix of framing and coalition-building tactics to shape political environments in different countries. Although these studies have demonstrated digital platform companies' political strategies and policy responses, we still lack a systematic understanding of the relationship between the platform, the actors in the multi-sided platform, and the wider context, and how this relationship enables or constrains policy change for the digital platform.

2.3. Rightful resistance

This paper adopted the concept of rightful resistance to describe how digital platform companies initiate policy change. This concept was originated from the literature on contentious politics which focuses on how actors make a political point and government policy change [42]. Its insights can be applied to digital platforms, given that both seek to change current arrangements [43]. In particular, the concept of rightful

resistance was developed by O'Brien and Li [44] to explain how policy change is possible for peasants in China. Rightful resistance is a type of popular contention in which resisters exploit divisions within the state in order to challenge the powerful and achieve their own goals. It does not emphasize neatly divided antagonists, with superordinates on one side and subordinates on the other; rather, it highlights a fragmented state where divisions, both in different systems and at different levels in the same system, pursue divergent interests. What is impermissible in one division may be tolerable or even supported by another division. So, to launch attacks on one division of authority, resisters either mobilise pressure from another division for direct intercession or cite official rhetoric that even unresponsive authorities must recognize. Drawing on the literature of multi-sided digital platforms and the concept of rightful resistance, this paper argues that digital platforms can achieve policy change by leveraging the diverse actors across the multi-sided platform, as well as various government agencies within the state.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research setting

This paper builds upon a longitudinal analysis of the political battles of ride-hailing companies in China, mainly including Didi, Uber (China) and Yidao.[1] Ride-hailing platforms connect passengers and private drivers through online platforms and algorithms. Due to their challenge to the existing taxi policies, ride-hailing companies faced a series of local government crackdowns and were in search of policy change in China [45]. The study period begins in July 2014, when ride-hailing companies started experiencing government resistance, and ends in July 2016, when a national policy was issued to govern the new industry. More importantly, it provides a natural comparative setting. The draft ride-hailing policy, which was released in October 2015, was interpreted as hostile to the new industry; however, the final policy enacted in July 2016 turned out to be friendlier. The contrasting ride-hailing policy outcomes enable us to identify the factors leading to policy change of digital platforms with some measure of confidence.[2]

3.2. Data sources

The data sources of this paper consist of interviews, media reports and documents. First, a total of 41 interviews were conducted between 2015 and 2018, closely tracking the development of events and regularly updating the data. The informants were mainly drawn from the three parties involved in the political battles, including managers, staff and drivers from ride-hailing companies, managers of taxi companies, and officials from different levels and divisions of the government. In addition, a few industry experts and academics were interviewed to mitigate the potential biases of internal informants. The interview protocol focused on key actors, activities, motivations, the interactions between them and policy outcomes. The protocol was customised for each interviewee to best capture their organisations' role in the process. Second, to collect media reports, I searched on Baidu News (the biggest Chinese news database and search engine) with the Chinese keyword "*wangyueche*" (ride-hailing service). From the search results, I only preserved the articles relevant to ride-hailing policy issues or important developments of the industry and those from widely-recognized media, such as sina.com, chinanews.com and Xinhua News Agency. In the end, I gathered more than 300 news articles produced between 2014 and 2017. Third, I collected company documents from ride-hailing companies' websites or social media, including CEO's speeches, interviews, public announcements and public letters, and government documents, such as leadership speech documents and regulatory documents, from the websites of various government departments (Table 1 summarises the data sources).

3.3. Data analysis

The data analysis follows the procedure proposed by Langley [46]. It started with a condensed chronological account of the case – a bulleted list of events along a timeline, with a brief description of the activities and outcomes of the key actors (Fig. 1 lists some significant events on the timeline). Then I highlighted these events on the timeline with different colours, with each colour representing one of the three major parties in the political battles – ride-hailing companies, governments and taxi incumbents. At this point, two distinct periods became evident – Between late 2014 and October 2015, transport authorities exerted repression on ride-hailing companies and proposed a very hostile draft policy; yet, the period between November 2015 and July 2016 is characterized by less repression and a very friendly national policy (Table 2 compares the draft and final policy). So I wanted to understand why this change had occurred.

Next, I divided all my raw data – interview notes, media reports and documents – into the two time periods and coded my data following the guidelines suggested by Corbin and Strauss [47]. I developed initial codes that stayed close to the language used in the raw data, which is primarily an inductive process. With the large number of initial codes, I came to see that ride-hailing companies behaved differently toward the governments in Period 1 and Period 2. I explored the following questions: (1) What are the differences between ride-hailing companies' political activities in the two periods? (2) What led the governments to respond differently to ride-hailing companies' activities in the two periods? With the questions in mind, I began to combine them into second-order themes and aggregate theoretical dimensions. This stage is an iterative process in which I worked back and forth between the data and theoretical frameworks that guided my analysis. I found that the concept of rightful resistance, which was developed by O'Brien and Li [8], helped me make sense of the data.

Table 1
Data sources.

Interview	Type of actor/organization	Number of interviewees
	Managers or staff at ride-hailing companies	21
	Government officials	6
	Managers of taxi companies	9
	Academic	4
	Journalist	1
Media reports	*Major Publications*	*Approximate number of articles*
	Xinhua News	*33*
	People's Daily	*42*
	China Daily	*18*
	China News	*21*
	Sina Tech	*48*
	Phoenix News	*31*
Documents	Ministry of Transport, http://zizhan.mot.gov.cn	
	The State Council, http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/China Road and Transportation Association, http://www.crta.org.cn/Didi Wechat Official Account	
	Yidao Wechat Official Account	
	China Taxi Industry Alliance (CTIA) Wechat Official Account	

[1] Although the data collection included all the three ride-hailing companies in China, it shows that Didi, which accounted for more than eighty percent market share, was the major player pushing for the new policies. This is not surprising considering that Uber (China) was later acquired by Didi and Yidao gradually lost its market share.

[2] Despite further political turmoil happening for the ride-hailing industry afterwards, this paper only focuses on the timeframe from early 2014 and July 2016 to explore the factors leading to the enactment of the national ride-hailing policy.

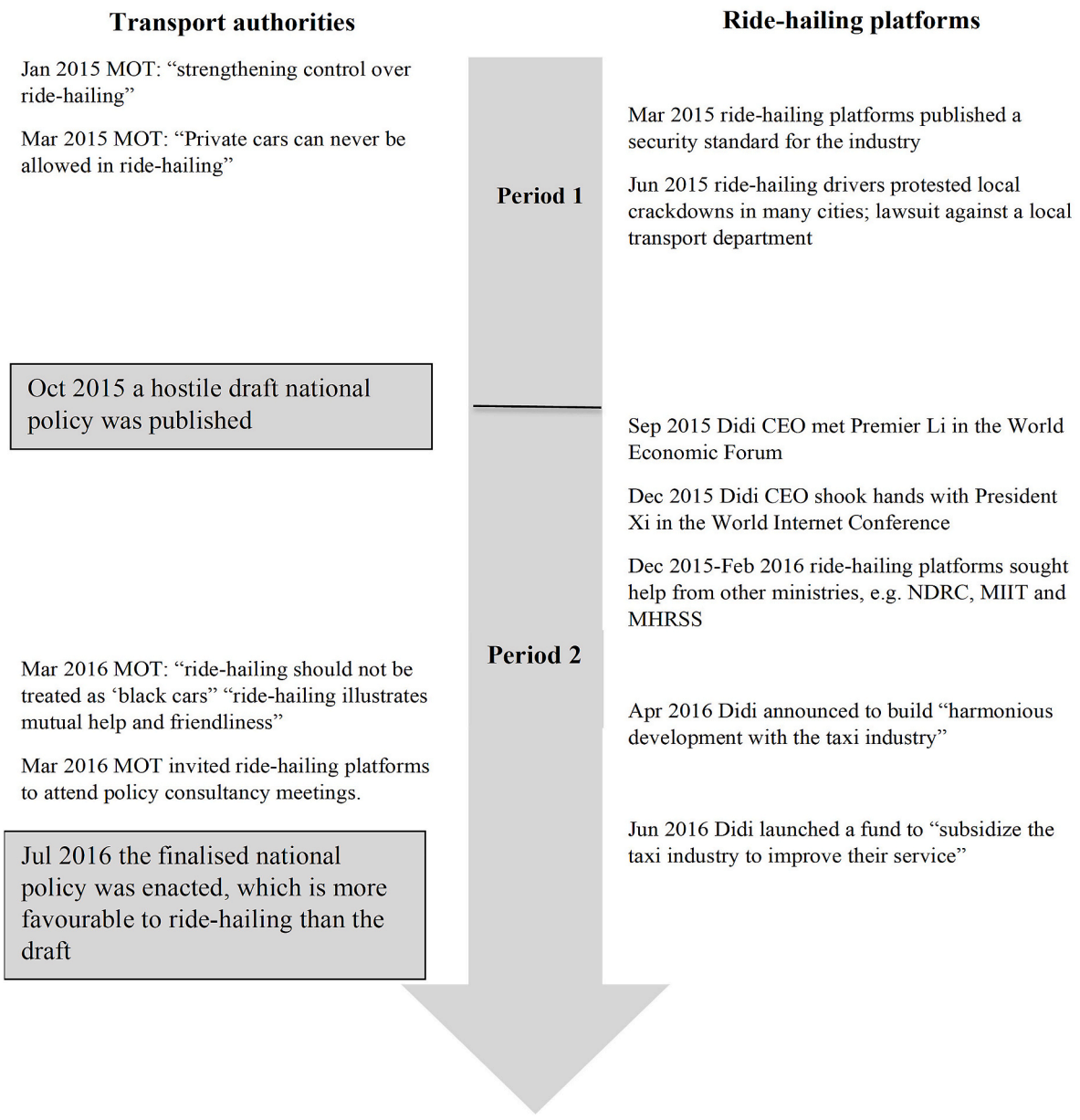

Fig. 1. Timeline of the ride-hailing political battle in China.

4. Findings

Ride-hailing services in China started off as a complement to taxi services. For instance, between 2012 and 2013, Didi was devoted to building an online platform to connect passengers and taxi drivers. It told the government that they were "helping increase the efficiency of taxi service" (Document 1).[3] This business model was generally welcomed by transport authorities. The Ministry of Transportation (MOT) issued the "Notice on the Promotion of Taxi Calling Service (including ride-hailing App)" in July 2014 (Document 2), meaning that the government still treated ride-hailing services as a subtype of taxi services at that time.

4.1. Period 1: direct confrontation

The political battle started when ride-hailing services in China expanded from taxis to private vehicles. In August 2014, Didi launched Didi Premier, which provides a high-end private car service for passengers. In mid-2015, Didi Express and Didi Hitch were put online to offer low-end private car services. These moves were accompanied by Uber's entry into China in July 2014, initially with its premier service and later with a cheaper service People's Uber (Interview 14).[4] At this time, ride-hailing companies became a threat to taxi companies and local transport authorities.

4.1.1. Repression from transport authorities

In China, local transport departments have been historically tied up with taxi companies. Taxi companies are highly dependent upon the "taxi operating licences" (equivalent to taxi medallions in the U.S.) granted by local transport authorities. Most taxi companies in China are state-owned because they have the privilege to obtain operating licences. In Shanghai, for example, the four largest taxi companies, which

[3] The web document references are listed in Appendix 1.

[4] The interview sources are listed in Appendix 2. To ensure anonymity, it uses acronym and only specifies the role and industry of interviewees.

Table 2
Comparison of the regulatory outcomes on the ride-hailing services issued by MOT.

	Period 1 Draft regulation (October 2015)	Period 2 Finalized regulation (July 2016)
Industry definition	"The ride-hailing industry should not have the dominant status in the market (in comparison to taxis). It should not violate the fairness of competition"	" The development of the ride-hailing industry is guided by the principle of high quality and diversification (from the taxi industry)"
Price	Controlled by the government	Determined by the market (unless the municipal government thinks it necessary for them to control the price)
Vehicles	Registered as "taxis"; No private vehicles	Registered as "ride-hailing vehicles"
Number	Municipal governments can decide the number of ride-hailing cars	No requirement
License	Ride-hailing drivers should get the "transport business license" from municipal governments	Ride-hailing drivers should get the "ride-hailing driving license" from municipal governments
Driver	Ride-hailing drivers cannot work for more than one platform	No requirement

account for more than 70% of the market, are all state-owned (Interview 25).

In late 2014, the expansion of ride-hailing led to a dramatic revenue loss for taxi drivers and caused damage to the interests of local transport authorities. In response, local transport authorities announced the new ride-hailing services as illegal. For example, the Shanghai Transport Committee made a public statement: "Didi is 'black cars'." (Document 3) A similar warning was made by the Beijing Transport Committee: "ride-hailing without our approval is illegal." (Document 4). Thousands of ride-hailing drivers were detained and penalised in Guangzhou, Jinan, Changsha, Shanghai, Nanjin, and Beijing (Document 5). In cities like Guangzhou and Chongqing, local authorities raided Didi and Uber's city offices and confiscated the companies' equipment (Document 6).

On the national level, MOT is accessible to the taxi industry through established bureaucratic channels (Interview 22, 29). In response to the demand of the taxi industry, MOT released a guiding document that required "a tighter control over the ride-hailing service" in December 2014 (Document 7). In March 2015, the Minister made an assertive statement: "Private cars can never be allowed in ride-hailing services." (Document 8).

4.1.2. Direct confrontation by ride-hailing companies

Ride-hailing companies adopted a very confrontational approach towards transport authorities in this period. As the companies were told to shut down by local transport authorities, they continued operating in the cities and promised to refund ride-hailing drivers when being fined (Interview). In this period, ride-hailing companies were seeking self-regulation by publishing their own industry safety standards, though the standards were immediately denied by MOT as illegal (Document 9). In March 2015, a Didi driver sued the local transport authority in the city of Jinan for fining him twenty thousand yuan (Document 10). This was widely interpreted as an open, radical move, given that the government is rarely sued by a citizen in China. Hundreds of ride-hailing drivers gathered and protested in Wuhan and Hangzhou in June 2015 when transportation officials seized a ride-hailing driver's vehicle, but the ride-hailing companies opted not to stop (Document 11).

Rhetorically, the public relations manager of Didi publicly cited a poem—"The mountain can never block the river, the river will always flow towards the East." (Document 12) It is an open accusation that the transport departments are the "mountains" blocking an inevitable trend of digital platforms. In addition, ride-hailing companies published many critical articles in newspapers with such headings as "Don't put an 'illegal hat' on ride-hailing companies," "Can the taxi industry reform really start?" and "It is time to change the privileged taxis." (Document 13).

During this period, ride-hailing companies aimed to crush the taxi industry. For instance, to protect the taxi industry, several local transport authorities required Didi to acquire local taxi companies as a condition tied to its operating licence in the cities. Didi turned down the offer (Interview). Another illustration is Shouqi Taxi, the biggest taxi company in Beijing with a strong government background. Shouqi Taxi approached Didi in the hope of joining Didi's platform. Didi declined, with the reason that "taxi licences do not fulfil the requirements of the Didi platform" (Interview).

4.1.3. Outcome: closed policy making and hostile draft policy

In Period 1, ride-hailing companies were excluded from the policy-making process. Policy making took place entirely within the government transport system. For instance, in June 2015, MOT organised a meeting to discuss the ride-hailing issue, but only transport officials and taxi company managers received meeting invitations. They reached a consensus to classify ride-hailing services as an online taxi service at the meeting so they could regulate the new service the same way they did for taxis (Interview 2, 22). In October 2015, the draft ride-hailing policy was published by national transportation officials without consulting ride-hailing companies.

The draft policy contained many clauses hostile to ride-hailing companies. It defines the ride-hailing industry as "an industry that is *not* dominated by the market"; the government can set the price for ride-hailing services; all ride-hailing vehicles should be registered with the government under the category of "taxi vehicles"; and it also gives municipal governments the authority to determine the number of ride-hailing vehicles in the cities (Document 14). Fig. 2 summarises the direct confrontation between ride-hailing companies and the transport authorities in this period.

4.2. Period 2: rightful resistance

In China, there is traditionally a one-month public consultation time between the release of the draft policy and the final policy, and the two versions are typically not very different (Interview). What is uncommon about this case is that the final ride-hailing policy was delayed for eight months and was considerably more favourable than the draft. What happened in the eight months? What could account for the change? It finds that the policy change is so abrupt that it cannot be attributed to the increasing market demand for ride-hailing; instead, it was facilitated by the shift in ride-hailing companies' political strategies from direct confrontation to rightful resistance. Specifically, between late 2015 and July 2016, the companies (1) sought support from powerful third parties within the government; (2) used the rhetoric of the central policies, and (3) co-opted the incumbent industry.

4.2.1. Seeking support from powerful third parties

In Period 1, there were only two antagonistic parties involved – ride-hailing companies versus transport authorities. However, after the debacle in October 2015, ride-hailing companies began to bring in third

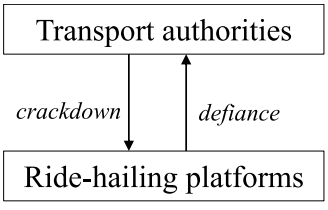

Fig. 2. Direct confrontation in Period 1.

parties into the battle. The powerful third parties are generated by political divisions within the state, which include politicians on the central level and officials on the same level other than the ones they are denouncing [44]. It shows that in Period 2, ride-hailing companies invited help from two powerful third parties – top leaders and other ministries – to curb the repression from transport authorities.

On the one hand, ride-hailing companies were actively seeking recognition from top leaders. Unlike transport authorities, which pay exclusive attention to the transportation industry, top political leaders prioritize overall economic growth for the country. For example, in September 2015, Didi CEO Cheng Wei successfully bid to become the co-chairman of the World Economic Forum and got a chance to talk with Premier Li Keqiang at the forum. In the concluding speech, Li sent a clear message in support of ride-hailing services, "The sharing economy is rapidly developing across the globe and has proven to be a new way of boosting the economy … It will encourage us to explore new economic territories by getting more people in." (Document 15).

Another prominent event was the World Internet Conference in December 2015. Cheng was given the opportunity to speak with and shake hands with President Xi Jinping when he stopped by the company's booth at the conference. Xi publicly praised the sharing economy in the conference, " (We should) speed up the development of the sharing economy and encourage all kinds of platforms based on the Internet." (Document 16). According to a staff at the government relation department of Didi, the company widely promoted the hand-shaking picture with Xi in the media, implying that they had obtained the backing of top leaders (Interview 5).

On the other hand, ride-hailing companies in Period 2 tried to involve other ministries in the policymaking process rather than limiting themselves to the transportation system. Some ministries, driven by different interests and concerns from MOT, became natural allies of ride-hailing companies. For example, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), a macroeconomic management agency under the State Council, is responsible for formulating policies for economic development. Didi established a specialised government relations team communicating with and delivering its policy demand to NDRC (Interview 5). The NDRC responded by taking both symbolic and practical actions. In March 2016, NDRC published an article that publicly encouraged "orderly development of the ride-hailing service" (Document 17). Before the final national policy was released in July 2016, NDRC told MOT in the policymaking meeting to remove some of the requirements in the previous draft policy, according to a government official attending the meeting (Interview 22).

Ride-hailing companies were also actively engaged with the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT), which oversees Internet companies. For instance, in December 2015, Didi launched the Sharing Economy Committee under the Internet Society of China, which is a quasi-governmental organization sponsored by MIIT (Document 18). In February 2016, MIIT made a statement in a press conference, "Although emerging forces like Didi would disrupt traditional industry, we are overall in support of it" (Document 19). Similarly, the companies tried to obtain support from the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security (MHRSS), which is responsible for increasing employment. Didi offered MHRSS to retrain redundant workers from traditional industries to become ride-hailing drivers. In response, MHRSS published a public endorsement, "(We) support Didi and other sharing economy companies to help unemployed workers from heavy industries to find jobs and increase their income" (Document 20).

4.2.2. Drawing on the rhetoric of the central policies

As opposed to the previous radical and confrontational communication with the government, ride-hailing companies rhetorically shifted to the so-called rightful claims in Period 2, which is to "employ the rhetoric and commitment of the powerful to curb the power" [44]. Rightful claims can unclog the communication channels with the government by framing their demands in resonance with the concerns of government officials. The rich soil of rightful claims is central policies, ranging from party documents, laws, State Council regulations, and leadership speeches [44].

Rightful claims can be made on economic initiatives of the central state. In multiple public announcements in early 2016, Didi depicted itself as "being committed to the 'mass entrepreneurship and platform' campaign promoted by Premier Li Keqiang" (Document 21). Likewise, it marketed itself as "a devoted practitioner of the "Internet Plus' action plan" put forth by the State Council and Premier Li (Document 22). In another public announcement, Didi aligned itself with the "supply-demand reform" promoted by President Xi, which aims to change the inefficient and overproducing industries while promoting innovative, emerging industries. It said, "Didi, as the representative of ride-hailing platforms, is trying to optimise the city's transport supply with the use of technology. We strive to become the pioneers of the 'supply-demand reform'. " (Document 23).

Furthermore, ride-hailing companies referred to political initiatives led by the central government. One frequently mentioned concept is "simplifying administration and delegating power" raised by Premier Li, which aims to lessen barriers for enterprises. In 2016, when being informed that local governments had the authority to make extra ride-hailing rules, the company replied, "We sincerely hope that local governments, in implementing the central regulations, consider the principle of 'simplifying administration and delegating power', to protect the interests of the wide public." (Document 24, Interview 12) Didi also justified its business model with the course of "co-governance and co-sharing" elaborated by President Xi. The idea is to create more public goods shared by all citizens. Didi noted in a public speech, "We are willing to contribute to the program of 'co-governance and co-sharing' with our large amount of data that can be used by city governments to build a more convenient transportation system." (Document 25; Interview 12).

4.2.3. Co-opting the incumbents

As rightful resistance is dependent upon the response of central political elites, a built-in limitation of this form of contention is that it must forgo revolutionary demands and embrace the values endorsed by the elites [8]. Maintaining social stability is one of the central government's top priorities in addition to economic growth. In the ride-hailing case, the central government cannot afford unrest by taxi drivers. In July 2016, when the final ride-hailing policy was released, the State Council made its position clear that "ride-hailing services should act as a complement to taxis. The two businesses should operate differently" (Document 26). In Period 2, a manager in charge of government relations in a ride-hailing company said that the industry learnt that a built-in condition to the central government's endorsement is the stability and survival of the taxi industry (Interview 3). In April 2016, CEO Cheng Wei publicly declared, "Didi is not seeking radical disruption but harmonious development with taxi companies." (Document 27).

To fulfil this objective, Didi aided taxi companies and taxi drivers. The earliest sign of friendliness was shown in January 2016, when Didi set up scholarships for taxi drivers' children. Didi also established a fund that would be used to "subsidise taxi companies to improve their services, increase care for taxi drivers, and reward socially responsible taxi drivers" (Document 28). Regarding technology, Didi made its data and algorithms available to some taxi companies, which automatically assign journeys to taxi drivers based on factors including distance, traffic, and driver ratings (Document 29).

Additionally, the company set up a cooperative business model with taxi companies. In April 2016, Didi announced a partnership with Haibo Taxi in Shanghai. With its big data analysis and machine learning technology, Didi is typically in charge of the online component, such as ride arrangement, online payment, and user management, while Haibo Taxi is in charge of the offline component, including providing cars, hiring drivers, and obtaining ride-hailing licences from the government (Document 30, Interview 14 15). In September, Didi signed similar deals with more than fifty taxi companies in over ten cities. In November, the

company further expanded the cooperative models to 150 taxi companies throughout the country (Document 31).

4.2.4. Outcome: Participatory policy making and regulatory acceptance

As a result of rightful resistance, Didi opened the previously closed policymaking process. According to an informant, since early 2016, the government relations teams of every major ride-hailing company have been invited to attend policy consultancy meetings held by MOT and local transport authorities across the country. During those meetings, ride-hailing companies were given the opportunity to express their concerns about the new policy (Interview 5). In March 2016, Didi made a public comment, "We are grateful that the governments have listened to and considered the voices of enterprises." (Document 32) In July 2016, as a public reply to the newly released national policy, Didi noted, " (The policy) has incorporated views of different communities in society, including scholars and ride-hailing companies." (Document 33). The final policy enacted by MOT in July 2016 turned out to be much friendlier to ride-hailing companies than the draft policy released in October 2015. For example, private vehicles are allowed to be used for ride-hailing services; it stipulates that the price of ride-hailing services is determined by the market rather than the government in the previous version; and ride-hailing services can be registered under a new category of "ride-hailing cars", which is distinct from the previous classification as "taxis". (Document 34). The rightful resistance strategy is presented in Fig. 3.

5. Conclusion and discussion

This paper aimed to understand how digital platforms change restrictive public policies. By analysing the process leading to the contrasting draft policy and final policy on ride-hailing in China between 2014 and 2016, it discovered that the favourable policy outcome was facilitated by the tactics of rightful resistance adopted by ride-hailing companies: First, they sought help from supportive government agencies to curb hostile authorities; Second, they justified their businesses with the rhetoric of the central policies; Third, they switched from beating to co-opting the incumbent industry. Drawing on the literature of multi-sided digital platforms and contentious politics, this paper employed the concept of rightful resistance to elucidate how digital platform companies can affect policy change by capitalizing on the diverse interests of actors within the multi-sided digital platforms, as well as various government agencies and initiatives within the state. For example, Chinese ride-hailing companies emphasized the job opportunities created for ride-hailing drivers and framed them as independent entrepreneurs, resonating with the government departments in charge of increasing employment rates and stimulating economic growth. The companies also emphasized the riders on the platforms as part of the public, aligning with the central government's initiative to protect public goods shared by all citizens. Additionally, ride-hailing companies co-opted taxi drivers into their platforms to ease conflicts with the incumbent industry and governments' concerns about instability. The concept of rightful resistance thus provides a systematic explanation of the relationship between digital platforms, actors in the multi-sided digital platform, and the wider context, elucidating how platform companies can leverage this relationship to affect policy change.

While this paper's empirical setting focuses on digital platforms in China, it has important practical implications for their counterparts in the West. Digital platforms in the US can also exploit the divisions within the government and seek help from potential allies who have different attitudes towards digital platforms. For example, Republican members tend to favor reduced regulatory barriers for the platforms, while Democrats are more interested in protecting the rights of platform workers. Also, US platform companies have already attempted to position themselves as significant contributors to innovation and economic growth in their communication with politicians, to align with government initiatives. Therefore, the key message is universal: digital platforms can strategically utilize the multi-sided nature of the platform and divisions within governments in various political environments.

This study also has several implications for academic literature. Firstly, this study makes a contribution to the literature on multi-sided digital platforms. While previous research has noted the inherent conflicts that arise from actors engaging across the multi-sided platforms, it has primarily focused on the challenges faced by platform companies as a result of these conflicts. However, this study argues that these conflicts can also provide opportunities for platform companies to establish legitimacy with different stakeholders in the wider context. By selectively leveraging different actors on the platform, companies can demonstrate their value to various groups and build support for their operations. Secondly, this study has implications for research on the policy influence of digital platforms. While existing research has examined the strategies that platform companies use to overcome regulatory obstacles, it has often relied on conventional models of corporate political strategy, such as lobbying and campaign contributions. This study extends this research by highlighting the unique multi-sided nature of digital platforms and the ways in which they influence the selection of political tactics. Thirdly, it speaks to studies on corporate political strategies. Extant studies have either focused on one facet of government or treated the different facets of institutions as independent from each other. However, this study implies that companies can exploit divisions and even conflicts within the government to achieve their political objectives and that politicians are not just passive receivers of corporate political strategies but proactively and selectively respond for their own purposes.

This study has some limitations that also offer opportunities for future research. First, this study has mainly focused on formal policy change, i.e., the enactment of a new policy. But the political outcomes can be defined more broadly. For example, how is the new policy implemented? Does it trigger more counteractivities by the incumbents? Future research may provide a richer description of the political outcomes. Second, this paper has generally treated digital platform industry as a unified entity, given that they share the same political goal. The ride-hailing industry is a unique case here in that Didi in China is the dominant player in the political battles. It allows me to simplify the

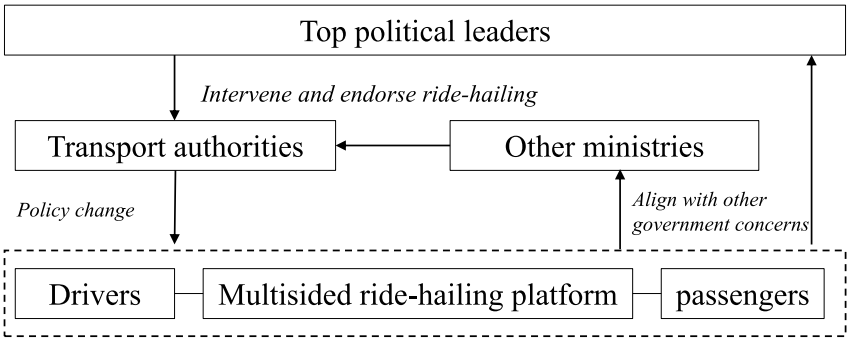

Fig. 3. Rightful resistance in Period 2.

story, but also limits its implications to the industries consisting of many more company players. It is possible that companies' positions in the market influence their commitment to political activities, and the complex mix of competition and cooperation between market actors will affect the stability of political alliances. Future research should try to understand the inter-firm dynamics in their political battles.

Third, while China serves as an ideal setting for this study and provides valuable implications for digital platforms in the West, there may be nuanced differences in the tactics used by platform companies in China and the West. For example, a comparison of the specific rhetorical strategies employed by digital platform companies in China and the West would be worth exploring. For instance, digital platform companies may emphasize more on the issue of social stability and collective benefits, whereas their counterparts in the U.S. may defend themselves with that of privacy and civil liberty. Fourth, this paper only examines the period from 2014 to 2016. However, the debate over platform public policies is still ongoing and new policy issues have arisen, such as the status of platform workers (i.e., contractors or employees) and privacy protection for users. Future research could investigate how platform companies and governments respond to these new issues.

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Declaration of competing interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

Appendix 1. Web document references

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Appendix 2. Acronym for interviewees

Interviewees	Acronym
Managers or staff at the government relation department at ride-hailing companies	Interviewee 1 - 10
Managers or staff at the public relation department of ride-hailing companies	Interviewee 11 - 13
Managers or staff at the operation department of ride-hailing companies	Interviewee 14 - 16
Former executives or board members of ride-hailing companies	Interviewee 17 - 18
Ride-hailing drivers	Interviewee 19 - 21
Government officials in Ministry of Transportation	Interviewee 22 - 23
Government officials in the local transport authorities in Beijing and Shanghai	Interviewee 24 - 27
Managers or staff at taxi companies in Beijing and Shanghai	Interviewee 28 - 32
Taxi drivers	Interviewee 33 - 36
Academics studying the ride-hailing industries	Interviewee 37 - 40
Journalist reporting the ride-hailing issues	Interviewee 41

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