Chapter 20
Assessing China’s E-Government and Its Impact on Government and Citizen Relationship

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ABSTRACT
The goal of this chapter is to examine the e-government development in China and its political impact on the communist countries’ transition to democracy by transforming relations between the government and citizens. It is widely accepted that e-government can help to encourage government transparency, expand the information flow, promote work efficiency and increase citizens’ political participation. This may be true in open democracies, yet there is little scholarly support for this conventional wisdom applied in authoritarian societies. This chapter will test hypotheses that e-government can improve the quality of government by enhancing citizens’ accessibility to information and service, increasing citizens’ political participation and promoting citizen outreach of the Chinese government. The chapter will indicate that e-government is transforming relations between citizens and the Chinese government and show how it is playing an essential role in China’s incremental process of democratization.

INTRODUCTION
It has been a decade since the Chinese government launched China’s Government Online Project in 1999. Today, 96.1% of national government agencies, 100% of provincial and metropolitan governments and 99.1% of local governing bodies have websites (Yang, 2009). The websites perform broad government functions including e-information, e-service, e-openness/transparency and e-citizen outreach/responsiveness.

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e-government in last 10 years has offered many opportunities for Chinese citizens to engage in political activities, such as accessing government documents, participating in online public opinion surveys, chatting with public officials online and sending e-mails to governors and mayors. However, questions must be raised about how effective e-government can be as an engine for political transformation. This chapter will test the hypotheses that e-government can improve the quality of government by enhancing citizens’ accessibility of public information and service, increasing citizens’ political participation and promoting citizen outreach of the Chinese government.

This study will be based on a comprehensive analysis of 31 provincial and metropolitan websites. The websites will be evaluated for the presence of four major e-government features: e-information, e-services, e-transparency, e-citizen outreach and responsiveness. The chapter will look at what kinds of features are available online, such as information posted and services provided to the public. It will also examine the government transparency and citizen outreach efforts by the Chinese provincial and metropolitan governments. For instance, what e-mails citizens sent to their governors and mayors and how public officials responded to citizens’ requests and complaints. Finally, the chapter will indicate how e-government is transforming relations between citizens and the Chinese government and how it is playing an essential role in China’s incremental process of democratization.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars have been debating the role of e-government in e-democracy since the new technology was developed. Tracy Western (2000) delightfully points out “the world is rapidly going digital. This new communications technology will not just affect democracy, it will transform it. Because democracy is an interactive form of government, the revolution in interactive communications will inevitably have its greatest effect on the most important ‘interactive institution’ - the government itself” (p.218). Watson and Mundy (2001) identify e-government and e-politics as elements of e-democracy. They argue that democracy requires an informed citizenry and that e-government informs citizens about their public officials and how to obtain access to them. E-government allows an unimpeded flow of information between citizens and government officials. Lenihan (2002) states that e-government is a move from a more closed to a more open system. He notes that e-government is likely to produce a wide range of new ways to connect government officials with organizations and individuals usually outside their organizational boundaries. This is changing the way information enters and flows around the political system and introducing influences into decision making.

Holliday and Yep (2005) support the idea that the conventional wisdom does apply in authoritarian societies like China. They argue that the current Chinese leaders, President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao, are strongly interested in working the crowd. “In this government environment, e-government can be turned into a useful tool for forging closer links between the government and the people. In spite of its subversive potential, e-government is very much a preferred option for encouraging greater participation” (p. 248)

With a neoinstitutional perspective to address the evolution and implementation of e-government in China, Yang (2003) notes that democratization in authoritarian countries like China may be a long-term incremental process, and “e-government will definitely play a significant role” (p.439)

However, some e-government researchers do not fully agree with the conventional expectations regarding the role of e-government in e-democracy in authoritarian states such as China. In its truest sense, Seifert and Chung (2009) argue, e-government is not about democracy. By launching e-government, China is trying to bring
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