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ABSTRACT

Based on information technology adoption theories and considering Chinese cultural characteristics, this article proposes a user centric IT/IS evaluation model composed of three determinants, namely perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and perceived fit, for investigating the e-government systems application and management in China. By empirically validating the model with survey data, it is demonstrated that the perceived fit has significant impacts on the end users’ evaluation towards e-government systems, due to the special element of Hexie in the Chinese culture. The results also indicate that the reasons for failures in e-government systems application in China largely lie in the lack of fit, which may root in the long power distance characteristic of the Far Eastern culture. The findings will provide scholars and practitioners with better understanding of the user evaluation regarding e-government systems in a Chinese cultural context.

Keywords: Chinese culture; e-government; IS evaluation; perceived fit

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, e-government has created a lot of interest among researchers in the IS field. The adoption of IT/IS leads to dramatic changes in the relationship between governments and citizens (G2C), governments and businesses (G2B), and governments and governments (G2G). Policy makers and practitioners are facing additional challenges arising out of the application of e-government information systems. Issues regarding IT/IS evolution, adoption, and diffusion in governmental organizations have been widely addressed at international academic conferences, as well as major MIS journals (Grant, 2005; Hackney, Kim, & Wastell, 2005; Heeks & Bailur, 2006; Irani, Love, & Montazemi, 2007; Srivastava & Teo, 2006).
To the extent of our knowledge, however, the studies on e-government in China from either theoretical or empirical perspectives are all still scarce. Furthermore, in the existing studies on e-government adoption and diffusion, cultural factors have been widely noticed as important but not yet thoroughly examined (Gallivan & Srite, 2005). Accordingly, this article is aimed at probing into the e-government adoption or evaluation mechanism from the cultural perspective, in the light of data collected from a Chinese context.

On the other hand, as the economy of China keeps growing rapidly, IT penetration brings dramatic changes to organizations and individuals in various respects. According to some observations, the impact of IT/IS application in China might be even more profound than that in any other country, as China is changing from an isolated centrally-controlled economy to a market that opens to the global economy (Martinsons, 2005). On such a background, it is worthwhile to probe into the research issues regarding IT/IS adoption and diffusion in Chinese governments.

As one of the driving forces of IT/IS applications, Chinese governmental organizations have long been striving to promote the use of information systems and are achieving elementary progress in their own IT/IS implementation and use. Government Web sites have been developed continuously. The ranking of China in the chart of e-government application (or readiness) has been rising as well (Liu, 2006; UN, 2005; West, 2006).

Despite the rising in the ranking systems which are mostly based on evaluating the functions of government Web sites, it is believed that IT/IS application in Chinese governments still lacks the abilities to support the goal of “providing more services and more convenience to citizens,” which is generally considered as the essential target for e-government applications (Holliday & Yep, 2005). According to a recent investigation, most of the e-government projects implemented in Chinese governments on various levels were not planned and designed for the citizens (Lu, 2006). Moreover, Chinese government leaders are using information technology to drive efforts both to accelerate decentralized public administration and at the same time to enhance government’s ability to oversee key activities (Ma, Chung, & Thorson, 2005). The concurrent pursuit of these two seemingly paradoxical objectives leads to a highly demanding context for e-government application and management in which administrative reform and systems implementation are tightly linked and frequently interacting.

A recent study examined the status the IT/IS diffusion in Chinese governmental organizations using a two-dimension framework, in which diffusion width (the extent to which IT/IS has reached in the organization) and diffusion depth (the extent to which an organization depends on IT/IS) were considered, and concluded that the e-government application in China has expanded to a large extent but not yet reach effective depth of use (Zhang, Guo, & Chen, 2007). While evolving from an “expanding stage” (during which the diffusion width expands) to a “penetrating stage” (during which the diffusion depth increases), user evaluation on the systems becomes a critical force that might accelerate or constrain the process (Zhang et al., 2007). Consequently, a user-centric IT/IS evaluation model would be particularly helpful for understanding the development of e-government application in China in the current period.

As a typical Eastern civilization, Chinese culture has always been deemed as very much different from the West in many aspects (Hofstede, 2001). Some studies have examined the characteristics of IT/IS management in Chinese companies (Guo & Chen, 2005; Mao & Palvia, 2006; Martinsons, 2005). While a lot of Chinese companies have already transformed into international enterprises, in which different cultures are fusing gradually, governments in China remain as traditional Chinese organizations where all the characteristics of Chinese culture are preserved (Lu & Zhou, 2005). Therefore, we feel that it is worthwhile to take the culture issues into account while studying the IT/IS diffusion in Chinese governments.
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