

# From E-Government to E-Democracy in China

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## INTRODUCTION

Endowed with 5,000 years of ancient tradition and heritage, China is reputed as the single oldest uninterrupted civilization in the world. Ancient Chinese made great contributions to mankind by the invention of the compass, gunpowder, papermaking, and printing, which are recorded in history as the Four Great Inventions. For centuries, China has been one of the world's most technologically advanced civilizations and the most dominant cultural influence to the East Asia region.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, China's resurgence as one of the preeminent powers brings worldwide attention. With its population of nearly 1.3 billion, its expansive territory, and its huge market potentials, China's modern development will continue to benefit the world, just as it did in ancient history.

Today, science and technology long have preoccupied China's policymakers, and there is an urgent need for China to wield modern information and communication technology (ICT) in order to reinvent government regime. However, the legacies of thousands of years of feudalistic tradition and the ideological control over the Mao era, which lasted for nearly three decades, make it difficult to revolutionize the country's governance system promptly. Therefore, the Chinese government had to adopt a gradual and steady approach toward social democratic reform. Through this process, e-government projects play an important role; for example, a national electronic audit network has given impetus to China's fiscal transparency and public expenditure management.

This article is organized as follows: First, there is a brief historical retrospect of China's cultural background; second, there is an introduction of current main e-government projects in China; finally, upon the analysis of the progression of fiscal transparency in China, an optimistic expectation of China's future e-government and e-democracy is given.

## BACKGROUND

China has a long and rich cultural tradition in which education has produced great impacts. Since ancient times, Chinese people have been educated to believe in

three dominant religions—Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism—among which the most influencing one was Confucianism, which not only influenced people's attitudes toward life and set patterns of living and standards of social value, but also provided a solid background for China's political theories and institutions. The ingenerate hypostasis of Confucianism is worship of heaven. Pursuant to the theory of Mencius, the continuator of Confucius, heaven was considered to have strong will and intention; it can reward or punish men and women according to their behaviors. The ruler, or the emperor, is the Son of Heaven; he is the supreme person appointed by heaven, and therefore, it is heaven who is the support of an emperor's authority (Dainian, 2002). Confucius never taught people of his age any basic ideas of people's rights against tyranny, the nature of human beings, and so forth. One of Confucius' apothegms in his famous book *Analects* is that common people can be made to follow the way; they cannot be made to understand the way (Confucius, 1998). By saying so, Confucianism teaches that a distinctive hierarchy of family, society, and state can bring harmony to the world, where everyone has peace, order, and discipline, which, in turn, will result in material prosperity for both the state and its people.

Taoism, the second influencing ideological thought in China, highlighted the harmonization of man and nature by emphasizing that the world is perfect and that people cannot improve it. The central theme of Taoism is "action by non-action," or "doing nothing"; that is, nothing strained, artificial, or unnatural. Man should act naturally upon object principles instead of imposing his subjective judgment on other people and external things. Man should be free from space and time, from worry and care, and from entanglement with politics and bureaucracy. Hence, through spontaneous compliance with the impulses of one's own essential nature and by emptying oneself of all doctrines and knowledge, one finally can achieve harmonization with heaven and can transcend all mundane distinctions (Tzu, 1998).

Differing from Western civilization, which originated from the Athenian democratic tradition of ancient Greece, China's historic and traditional background implied little democratic and transparent elements; ordinary Chinese people were not entitled to the basic right of participating in government affairs. From another point of view, China's history is characterized by repeated divisions and

reunifications amid alternating periods of peace, war, and violent imperial dynastic change, which made the leaders of every dynasty by and large neglect people's voices and rights. During the period of the Culture Revolution from 1966 to 1976, this situation reached an extreme level.

## E-GOVERNMENT PROJECTS IN CHINA

A number of potentially significant events occurred after China adopted the open door and economic reform policy in the latter 1970s; since then, China has made great progress toward integration with world social and economic development. Encountering the age of information technology, the Chinese government has been investing actively in the technology of the Internet and has been encouraging its usage for the purpose of capturing the potential commercial value, while engaging in e-government construction so that scientific and technological achievements can be turned into practical productive forces as soon as possible and can enhance the spreading and application of high technology and mature technologies (China Internet Information Center, 2004). One of the great achievements is a series of national e-government projects that have been implementing gradually and steadily in government agencies and geographical regions. The e-government projects consist of two parallel stages through a top-down approach: one is the Government Online Project (GOP); the other is the so-called Golden Projects. According to Chinese ancient tradition, golden color is noble and auspicious, and the use of the color was restricted only to some special occasions. Giving the name Golden Projects to e-government projects indicates that the Chinese government has attached great importance to the projects and has made a strong commitment to carry them out (Ling, 2004).

The Government Online Project was scheduled to take place in three phases:

- **Phase One: Enabling Technologies:** Focused on connecting 800 to 1,000 government offices and agencies to the Internet.
- **Phase Two: Information Sharing:** Aimed at having government offices and agencies move their information systems into compatible electronic form.
- **Phase Three: Paperless Government:** Planned to occur sometime in the future, when government operation will be based on digital processing and totally free from paper works. The purpose of the GOP is to create a centrally accessible administrative system that collects and transports data to and from users, who are supposed to be the public and

the enterprise as well as government departments. By official statement, the GOP will pursue the following:

- Provide more effective coordination between and across government organizations, both horizontally (among ministries) and vertically (from center to locality)
- Build up national and worldwide confidence in the Chinese central and local governments' presence on and commitment to the Internet.
- Make available to the public government information while also reducing government expenses by increasing administrative efficiency.
- Lay a base for the establishment and growth of China's electronic government.
- Encourage electronic procurement.
- Begin to accelerate the acceptance and use of the information economy in China. (China Ministry of Information Industry, 2000)

The Government Online Project was launched formally in 1999; by the end of 2000, about 80% of all government agencies, both local and national, had established their Web sites on the Internet. Following the Government Online Project, it has been the Enterprises Online and Family Online Projects. Nowadays, government Web sites offer a great range of information, from introductions of departmental functions and state and local laws and regulations to information about tax payments and project bids. After the sudden outbreak of the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) epidemic in early 2003, the Chinese government had made great progress toward information exposure in reporting all paroxysmal epidemics and chronic diseases such as hepatitis B and C, schistosomiasis, tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS, and so forth, across the country on official Web sites in a timely and regular manner.

During the period of 1991 to 2000, China's government focused on another ambitious, comprehensive, and far-reaching e-government construction—the Golden Projects (see Figure 1). Since pioneering three key projects—the Golden Bridge Project, the Golden Cards Project, and the Golden Customs Project—a series of integrated Golden Projects, including intra-government communications, education, healthcare, medical research, and agriculture, has been implementing gradually and steadily in the country.

## FUTURE TRENDS

Although much of e-government is about the delivery of services and the government's dealings with the private

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