


Chapter 1

The Past of Digital Government: Insights From Chinese Practices

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ABSTRACT

In the digital age, the progression of government models presents a nuanced problem that this study meticulously investigates. Contextually, the inception of digital government in China has transpired through three distinct phases, each marked by a characteristic emphasis: technology-oriented, mutual transparency-oriented, and people-oriented. The analysis underscores a critical shift in emphasis across these stages, from an initial concentration on technological deployment to a present focus on mutual transparency and citizen engagement. Despite the evident progress, an issue emerges around capturing and articulating these stages with precision and objectivity. In response to this problem, this study undertakes an in-depth examination of case studies pertinent to each phase, which unravels insights into their defining characteristics. The findings indicate a potential trajectory towards a digital government model that further accentuates public participation. In terms of objectives, this study endeavors to deepen the comprehension of the evolution of digital government in China and shed light on its potential future trajectory, thereby making a significant contribution to the dialogue around policy formulation and the future development of digital governance.

INTRODUCTION

In the transformative wake of the fourth industrial revolution, the digital sphere's growing influence is profoundly impacting global socio-economic infrastructures. Technologies such as the Internet of Things, cloud computing, big data, mobile internet, and artificial intelligence, are driving this transformation, dismantling traditional boundaries and establishing a new order of interconnectedness and efficiency. At the epicenter of this digital metamorphosis lies the concept of digital government, an entity charged with the integration of these advanced technologies into governance mechanisms. It is tasked with managing the expectations of an increasingly digitally literate citizenry, whose daily lives are closely intertwined

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with the digital ecosystem. The digital government's role is thus emerging as not merely administrative but pivotal, signalling a paradigm shift in governance strategies. It calls for an approach that not only leverages technological advancements to streamline processes and enhance service delivery but also emphasizes user-centricity and inclusivity. This novel framework encapsulates an understanding of the citizens' needs, seeks their active participation, ensures transparency, and promotes a sense of shared ownership and accountability. Thus, digital government is moving beyond a technocratic tool to an enabler of citizen empowerment, marking a new era in public administration and governance (Aladalah et al., 2018).

In China, a nation marked by its rapid pace of digitalization, this transformation is particularly palpable (Meng, 2012). With the acceleration of "Digital China" construction and the increasing emphasis on modernizing governance capacities, the call for digital transformation of the government is clear and urgent. The progression towards a digital government in China is sprawling, manifesting in varied models that reflect the distinct economic standing, industrial foundations, and development goals across different regions and stages of implementation. Each model embodies unique strategies and mechanisms, underscoring the non-static nature of digital government. It is an evolving entity, adaptable and responsive to the changing socio-economic contexts.

The academic discourse on the models of digital government construction can be categorized into four main streams. The first stream, the theoretical school (Liu & Zhu, 2019; Kontogeorgis & Varotsis, 2021), delves into the conceptual framework of digital government. The second, the institutional design school (Chen et al., 2021; Jiang, 2021), focuses on the systemic structures that facilitate digital governance. The third stream, the technological transformation school (Wang, 2022; Zhang, 2022; Guo et al., 2023), investigates how advancements in technology can spur the evolution of digital government. Lastly, the service model school (Zhang et al., 2021) studies the methods and practices of delivering digital public services. However, these research perspectives, though insightful, have certain limitations. The theoretical school, while establishing the foundational understanding, may overlook practical considerations. The institutional design school, focused on systemic structure, might underestimate the role of human factors and cultural aspects. The technological transformation school, with its emphasis on technical aspects, might sideline organizational and policy issues. Lastly, the service model school, while essential, could disregard the interplay between different elements of digital government, such as technology, policy, and human factors. This paper fills these gaps by offering a comprehensive, holistic approach. It does not just consider digital government as an amalgamation of separate elements but views it as an integrated system where policy, technology, and service delivery interact and evolve together. The paper strives to offer an extensive perspective on digital government's development, especially within the Chinese context, considering its rapid pace of digitalization.

In light of these observations, this study aims to address these gaps by examining the evolution of China's digital government. The central research question is: "Does the archetype of China's digital government remain static, or is it subject to evolution?" Guided by this query, the study seeks to delineate the unique characteristics of digital government across different stages of its development, comprehend the drivers behind these evolutionary transitions, and speculate on possible future directions. By doing so, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of digital government, tracing its growth and potential future trajectories, thus enriching the existing body of knowledge. This exploration is envisaged to provide valuable references for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers in the field, facilitating more informed decision-making and effective strategizing in digital government development.

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