



E-government in China: Bringing economic development through administrative reform

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Available 18 November 2004

Abstract

Within China, 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. The concurrent pursuit of these two seemingly paradoxical objectives is, in turn, motivated by an explicit desire to modernize and make more competitive the Chinese economy. Considering what Chinese leaders mean by 'administrative reform' is a key to resolving the apparent contradiction between administrative decentralization and government oversight. In particular, this paper provides a number of illustrations of how Chinese e-government initiatives can be best understood as vehicles intended to support economic development through an increasingly transparent and decentralized administration while at the same time providing the central government the information and ability to efficiently monitor and potentially steer economic activity at a more abstract level.

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1. Introduction

Through e-government, China's leaders expect to foster administrative reforms by transforming government functions, streamlining procedures, and enhancing administrative

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transparency. This expectation helps to resolve two seemingly contradictory objectives for e-government in China. On the one hand, leaders are striving to use e-government as an engine for economic development, and on the other hand, they want to further consolidate certain roles for the central government. This article argues that understanding what the leaders mean by “administrative reform” provides a key to resolving this seeming contradiction. To accomplish this, the authors will outline some of the e-government applications now being introduced in China. In so doing, we spend some time examining the reasons Chinese leaders have given for wanting to use information and communication technologies (ICTs) within government. In particular, we will provide evidence that administrative reform, *Xingzheng Guanli Tizhi Gaige* [in Chinese three somewhat distinct concepts: (1) transforming government functions; (2) reengineering government process; and (3) enhancing government transparency] has been a driving force behind many of China’s e-government applications at both the national and local levels. This reengineering of the public administration, in turn, is motivated by a desire to stimulate economic progress. More specifically, we will suggest that within China, IT applications in government are intended to concurrently aid economic development by supporting a more decentralized and transparent public administration and to provide the central government with tools to provide the information necessary to high level government monitoring and control.

We then conclude with an overview of some of the major e-government initiatives now underway in China. While we examine applications at both the national and the local level, it is interesting that some of the most innovative projects are occurring at the local level (though sanctioned and funded by the national government). Understanding why there is such vitality at the local level provides a basis for further understanding what Chinese leaders mean by “administrative reform”.

2. Evolving perspectives on the impact of ICTs in China’s political economy

2.1. Policy environment in China for e-government initiatives

Under the leadership of the China Communist Party (CCP), the State Council, the executive body of the central government, consists of 30 ministries and commissions and 18 organizations and six offices. Almost all the local governments including 22 provinces, 8 autonomous regions, and 4 municipalities are involved in the ICT applications. Early in 1992, the general office of the State Council set out implementation plans to develop the office automation system for national administration. The State Council required governments at all level to build an office automation system in support of administrative decision making and public services.

In 1993, China initiated the three Golden Projects to build sophisticated information network throughout the country. Based on this information network, the State Council of China has been conducting “Government Online Projects (GOP, *Zhengfu Shangwang Gongceng*)” since January 1999 to promote the applications of Internet-based technology at all levels of government.

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