

# Governing by Technology in China

An Interview with Jesper Schlæger

*By Emilie Frenkiel*

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**Chinese society has been thoroughly transformed by digital tools, which private companies have developed for people to shop, chat, entertain themselves. The central and local governments have tried to keep up to date. Jesper Schlaeger explains the intricacies of Chinese eGovernment.**

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**Jesper Schlaege** is a Specially Appointed Researcher in Sichuan University. He received his Ph.D. in political science from the University of Copenhagen in 2012 and has postdoctoral experience from Lund University. His main field of research is Chinese public administration with current projects covering eGovernment, innovation management, and sustainability governance. He is also a Section Editor on the open-access journal Chinese Public Administration Review (cpar.net).

**Books & Ideas: Have digital technologies been mobilized during the Covid-19 outbreak? What are your observations and analyses of their efficiency and limits? What lessons can be drawn for other countries?**

The coronavirus mitigation policies included the launch of a range of online government services within a short time. One of the main intriguing questions about Chinese eGovernment was why the development of interactive online services through the early 2000s had been so relatively slow. Various reasons have been cited, but usually, the argument was that it was unfeasible due to particularities in the Chinese setup such as lack of shared databases, lack of digital ID solutions, and the size argument has also been mentioned. In some way, you may argue, the coronavirus crisis has shown that explanations hinging on technical constraints turned out to be incorrect. Instead, it appears that the main reason was—and is—the political will to change. In that sense, the virus lock-down came as a critical juncture enabling the promotion of online government services. A common trait of policy-making which we see repeated in the Chinese polity is that often some kind of exogenous destabilizing event is needed to generate institutional change.

During the lockdown, a series of government application services were put online. It was different between localities which services were on offer, but in most places they would include items like getting a business certificate, paying taxes, various utility payments, vehicle registration issues, applying for social benefits, and—very importantly during those days—health codes and hospitalization reimbursement. After the restart of the economy, the use of health certificates has been an important tool in disease prevention in the face of increased internal mobility. These are QR-codes that use a broad array of information about citizens based on location data, information about visits to hospitals. A risk assessment is made for each person in real-time, and everybody is given a code to signal if they are in the low-, medium-, or high-risk group of being virus carriers. In a way, even technically, this is a different version of the social credit system. Being in anything but the low-risk group implies that public transportation is out of the question, as are visits to most businesses and government offices. Everywhere you enter, the code will be checked. Health certificates are good tools for disease management, but of course, the privacy aspect means that some people in Europe might feel uncomfortable about it.

In terms of online services, most European governments are already beyond the point China has reached by now. In Denmark, taking the head-start, all first-contact with the government has to go through the Internet channel. But also in France, you can move address (which can be a major hassle in China), income taxes can be declared online (China has just recently adopted online tax declaration), and birth, marriage, and death certificates can be ordered online and delivered by mail. All of these functions have been standardized in China, supported by ICT, but citizens still have

to go to at least one physical office to apply and/or pick up the documents. Furthermore, there is generally less need for contact with the government for ordinary citizens as many of the application items required in China simply do not exist in Europe—the permit to give birth in a hospital, to mention one. As regards citizen services enhanced by eGovernment, China has been an adopter rather than an innovator, so in that sense, lessons for other countries may be limited. In contrast, with digital monitoring and comprehensive database construction in, e.g., the Social Credit System and the Corporate Credit System, China has taken steps to govern society by algorithms that would be impossible in European countries due to data protection and privacy regulations. Another thing that stands out is the high mobile-phone penetration rate in China, and the high uptake of mobile eGovernment delivered on private platforms. In a way private actors have been the main drivers of innovation in eGovernment in China.

### **Books & Ideas: How do you define eGovernment or eGovernance and which term applies best to China?**

First, should we use the term eGovernment or eGovernance? Roughly the concepts of eGovernment and eGovernance reflect a top-down approach versus a network approach to governing. The culture of eGovernment in China does not involve much focus on the inclusion of a broader range of actors. Instead, it reflects a top-down vision of the distribution of roles in society, where public affairs are handled by the state. In contrast, the term eGovernance is often used to indicate the involvement of civil society in co-production or cooperation related to public affairs. So, the way the political system in China works, eGovernment is currently the most appropriate definition.

Secondly, should we define eGovernment broadly or narrowly? In Chinese, there is a distinction between *dianzi zhengwu* (e-government affairs) and *dianzi zhengfu* (the eGovernment). Both are translated into eGovernment, but for the uses here we can call them e-government affairs (*zhengwu*) and the e-government (*zhengfu*). The e-government-affairs definition is the one most commonly used by academics and practitioners in China. It narrows the field of inquiry to the government websites. This reflects the way eGovernment is perceived in publications by the UN, the World Bank, and the OECD. Such a narrow definition is fine if the purpose is to work specifically with the online interface between citizens and the government administration. In contrast, “the e-government” refers broadly to the whole of government. My use of

the English-language term is closest to the *dianzi zhengfu* definition with one important difference: Whereas the Chinese literature treats “the eGovernment” as something inherently good—because it is a technological augmentation of governing in a digital era, as compared to an inefficient, conventional, non-networked mode of management—I suggest, for academic purposes, that eGovernment is used not as a normatively desirable end-state of government but rather it is a term to give us a handle on the phenomenon of use of ICT in the public administration for good and bad. In other words, I do not believe that eGovernment is inherently good. Instead, I neutrally use the term to ask questions. The reason for using a broad definition instead of e-government affairs is that the latter has a blind spot concerning operations inside the government, we can call it the back-office. In the back-office, we find interactions between bureaucracies, which can have large consequences for how governing is conducted. Think, for instance, about the surveillance capacity that allows disciplinary departments to conduct oversight of case processing in other departments. This may not have any direct effect on how citizens perceive the “service” they get from the government, but it may have very tangible effects in terms of reducing corruption, which may be even more important. It is easy for citizens to see, for instance, if they get their permit to open a restaurant in two days instead of having to wait for several weeks. In contrast, the normal citizen will probably never notice if public vehicles are used for private use, but this may be found out by electronic registering, thereby eliminating a source of corruption. Of course, we can talk specifically about e-monitoring to address this particular aspect, but I find it informative to enclose it all within our academic understanding of eGovernment.

The broad definition of eGovernment allows us to understand in a more holistic way the changes brought to the public administration through the use of new digital technologies. For academic purposes, eGovernment is defined broadly as the use of digital information and communication technology in the public administration. This broad definition allows us to look at eGovernment in a historical perspective, a birds-eye view.

**Books & Ideas: How has it evolved? What are the main reasons for these changes (social media, e-commerce efficiency, collaboration with private actors, user-orientation, focus on serving residents, fight against corruption, transparency, responsiveness, etc.)?**

In the 1990s China embarked on a range of informatization projects named the Golden Projects (*jinzi gongcheng*).<sup>1</sup> The purpose was to build up a technical infrastructure of broadband networks, ATM-networks, and shared databases within the government to enable an information society. These projects marked the beginning of a period of focused development of eGovernment in China. The year 1999 was officially designated the Year of eGovernment, and all government organizations were mandated to set up their websites. From this point, Chinese academics and practitioners started to use the word eGovernment, in the narrow sense. There were fervent discussions about how to set up websites, their functionality, and the need for interactivity. Then came the first international benchmarking studies, and China was not doing well. So, a second campaign to improve the level of government websites was launched, now more cognizant of how the international community would assess the progress. Information was updated more regularly, and over many years, new functionalities were added. Along the way, some functions were also disbanded, such as the bulletin board systems that required too much time for government employees, as they had to respond to a flood of messages many of which there was no way of solving online anyway. Real-name registration was adopted.

Until the late 2010s, interactivity was never really a thing, but then micro-services were attempted on the WeChat and Alipay platforms. Paying for gas and water, and then expanding into a broader range of services. Beforehand, paying utility bills, a monthly or quarterly recurring event, would include a visit to the local office, waiting in line, making a payment. So, depending on the distance to the office and your luck with the waiting line, it would take half-an-hour or so to complete. On the digital platforms, a few clicks suffice. Less than a minute. Returning to our distinction between eGovernment and eGovernance, the provision of public services on private platforms is arguably a way of embracing eGovernance. However, the government did not share any decision power with the Internet companies. The final decisions would be based on a number in a government database or involve a government bureaucrat behind the virtual counter. To make a comparison, an internet company owns a shop with a door, desk, and all the other things you need to conduct office-business. Now, the government rents this shop and puts their employee behind the desk. When a citizen stops by to make an inquiry or apply for a certificate, it does not matter who owns the building, they will get their service. However, as this is a digital world, the locus of control of access and the data produced during the interaction is

<sup>1</sup> Hachigian, Nina and Qiu, Jack Linchuan, *A New Long March: E-Government in China*, Paris, OECD, 2005.

quite important. The private provider decides if people can get through the door, and they govern the detailed information about the process. Consequently, there are data-security issues and privacy issues involved in this arrangement. Then came the coronavirus lockdown, which gave a massive boost to put government services online. Again, private platforms were used for convenience rather than setting up entirely new systems. Most importantly, online health certificates have been adopted all over the country. This is where we are today.

The policy in an area of such complexity as eGovernment is the result of multiple interdependent factors. Technological inventions self-evidently played a role, but if we look at the political influences, what were the main factors? First, the personal interests among influential politicians. Informatization involves large government investments in technology, including computer hardware and software and services such as maintenance. Putting government online not only implies that public organizations themselves will make increased use of such technologies, but this will also be a driver of informatization in society. Everybody has to be online to take part in the virtual government. The telecom operators, in particular, the *de facto* duopoly China Telecom and China Mobile, will have increased traffic on their networks. Also, hardware providers are looking at a trillion-dollar market. So, a political decision to put government online creates opportunities for some, while for others, e.g., suppliers of office stationery, or postal services, stand to lose their business. There are thus large financial interests coupled to such development, and it is reasonable to propose that distribution of enrichment opportunities for the networks behind certain officials has played an important role.

Secondly, the pressure to maintain international competitiveness. eGovernment websites grew out of eCommerce. The use of computing in businesses inspired global organizations such as the World Bank and OECD to launch new ideas about computer-enabled one-stop-shopping. Much of this had to do with creating a good, soft environment for investment. Internationally, eGovernment quickly became the object of benchmarking, which means data on various measures was compared and ranked. The global benchmarking schemes tend to focus on things that are easy to measure, for instance, the content and functions of websites. Such schemes guided the first attempts from the Chinese government to study for the test. However, rather quickly there was a realization that the new computer systems also afford the collection of information about ongoing processes. At any given point in time, a system of case processing such as implemented in the Chinese administration can tell about the number of and types of cases, how long they have been processed, or if they are

overdue. For example, when a company goes to the Jinjiang District Government Affairs Service Center in Chengdu and hands in an application for labor dispatch certification (i.e., permission to send employees off to work in a different company temporarily), all the relevant documents are checked such as the business license, official seal, capital verification documentation, and so on. Once the government employee opens a new case, the case-processing system automatically assigns a case number and begins a countdown. The national time limit is 20 days, but Jinjiang District has a time commitment of 15 days. The receiving government employee prints a receipt (including a QR- or barcode with the case number) which the company can use for pick-up of the certificate. Once the automatic timer gets close to the limit, and the case is still ongoing, the system will send an orange warning, and later a red alert, to the supervision office (this data is available also to other levels of government) who will contact the case manager to ensure the time commitment is adhered to.

Thus, supervisors will easily find out if the case manager is behind schedule, or maybe even deliberately slowing down case processing to get speed money. As all the cases are registered, it is convenient for supervisors to make monthly statistics and find out which case managers are working faster than the average and getting fewer complaints. Then, these managers can be awarded as an employee of the month, and get a salary bonus. In the long run, many distinctions and a good work record will also enhance possibilities for promotion. Similarly, benchmarking can be used as an indicator in cadre evaluations for employees who set up websites or for those middle-managers who are responsible for government informatization. For example, the criteria from the central government website census for a good website included: access (to the website and online services); timely updates of website content and menus; no errors (spelling errors, fake material, lewd content); and several other items. If a locality sets up a website that gets a good score based on these items, the officials responsible for its development will benefit personally in terms of salary bonuses or even promotion opportunities. As time went by, eGovernment benchmarking was taken to another level, also starting to use organizational indicators. That means, not only do assessors look at the websites, but also at the organizations that create the websites. It could include measures such as the number of people working full-time on the websites, the availability of earmarked funding, or the establishment of an office dedicated to eGovernment. The purpose is to find out how to improve the online delivery of public services. So, in this way, the decision-makers can steer eGovernment to provide services that are valuable for citizens as well as businesses. In turn, this will lead to higher scores on another kind of benchmarking, namely assessment of the investment environment.

Thirdly, the need to enhance government legitimacy. Without elections, the Chinese government has to provide public services to generate output legitimacy. In a democracy, people acknowledge the authority of political representatives because they have been elected by the people according to the law. Even when the output is not good, such as a law that has negative consequences, the system retains legitimacy because the process was followed, and the electorate can just choose someone else next time if they are unhappy. For an autocracy, this logic does not apply, as there are no direct elections. So, the way to generate support for the regime is to deliver stability, economic growth, environmental sustainability, and other positive things on the output side. In China, it was not so much the computer-based eGovernment that made a difference for the ordinary citizen but rather the mobile services that have proliferated over the last couple of years. Chinese are avid users of mobile phones and this has made way for various mobile government solutions. Seeing how convenient online shopping had become, there was pressure on the government to provide services that emulated, at least to some extent, the convenience of the commercial platforms. In this game, China is again in the situation of having a duopoly shared between the Alibaba-group and the Tencent Corporation. The government simply has nowhere near the technical clout and infrastructure to deliver services as conveniently as the two large providers, which has led to the co-optation of the platforms into the government information architecture. Synchronized with the international pressure, benchmarking and inclusion of KPIs into performance evaluations of the cadres were also used to provide better services to the general public. So, we can see how the updated tools of Chinese cadre-management allowed the government to address both international competitiveness and national legitimacy concerns.

**Books & Ideas: Are the digital strategies of Chinese central and local governments comparable with those of other countries (especially in Asia and Europe)? What are the specificities of the Chinese mix of online and offline governance tools? What is the interplay between central and local governments as regards e-government/e-governance?**

Central government strategy is a very important driver of eGovernment development through high-level political attention, making project funds available, and adjusting KPIs to include informatization indicators. Technical innovations in government are also considered strategic opportunities to develop new industrial sectors, for instance, big-data analysis and cloud services. Regarding these elements, the USA has a similar strategy, and China is very much inspired by the American way. The EU also has strategies, but the supra-national setup of the union makes it less



targeted than the large powers. Japan, with its conservative bureaucracy, has had a slow roll-out of eGovernment services whereas South Korea has been consistently at the very top of national eGovernment rankings for many years, and provides very convenient government affairs services on the Internet.

In China, at least up until the coronavirus broke out, eGovernment has mainly been an auxiliary tool to assist the offline case processing. Here is an anecdote. Some years ago, I visited a government affairs service center in Sichuan, one of these one-stop-shopping initiatives where all applications are undertaken under one roof, saving time and reducing complexity for the citizens. The director was, rightfully, very proud to show me the impressive improvements in case processing efficiency and the orderliness of the whole thing, it was a very nice building with marble floors and air-conditioning, much like a bank. After his presentation, the director asked me if I had any suggestions for improvements. I did. I suggested, very politely, to tear down the center. Initially, the director was shocked—he was not expecting anyone to suggest disbanding his precious center. Then, I explained that my suggestion was to put the services entirely online. In that light, he did agree with my point, and that the center was probably more of an interim improvement than the future of governance. However, he saw it as a necessary step, because some people living in the district—elderly, disabled, or poor—were unable to use online services. This argument has been made in Europe as well, and it is indeed important for the government to consider all groups in society before completing a transition to online services. Yet, even though a government might not want to tear down its brick-and-mortar points of contact, this does not preclude providing the services online as part of a multi-channel approach with the option of visiting an office as well.

For the same reason that I provoked the office director in Sichuan, I also find the slogan pioneered by local governments in Zhejiang of “run once at most” (*zui duo pao yi ci*) rather unambitious. Why do citizens have to run in the first place? The government could just put the services online. The slogan “click once at most” would be more impressive and is also suggested by Chinese researchers as a way forward. Furthermore, before you can start running, there are often administrative hurdles to be overcome, the so-called preconditions (*qianzhi tiaojian*), it could, for instance, be a requirement of a health assessment conducted at a hospital, which means, in reality, you will be going to a hospital twice to undergo tests and pick up the test results. So, as much else, the running is calculated from the point of contact with the government and not seen from the citizen perspective. I believe this is an important difference to

most systems in Europe. Make no mistake, you may be required to get a health assessment in Europe as well. But the government will not claim that it is convenient.

### **Books & Ideas: Is eGovernment equalizing or elitist in the Chinese context?**

The question of whether eGovernment furthers social justice or concentrates benefits with an exploitative elite is fair, but before assessing the normative implications we need to address two potential pitfalls. First, we need to recall the consensus within eGovernment research (and research on technology in society) that technologies are socially constructed. Surely, technological discoveries may provide new insights or capabilities that fundamentally alter the equation for human interaction with nature. Therefore, in a long-run perspective society is somehow technologically determined. However, if we leave out the *longue durée* and focus on what happens in the short term when a new technology is introduced into the public administration in China, it is obvious that not all government employees accept changes to their work. The government does face a pressure from the public to adopt computing or microblogging, so these new technologies cannot be completely ignored. Yet, there is a lot of wriggle room concerning which functions the government chooses to adopt and how the new interfaces are designed.

Secondly, I am not sure I would use the terms equalizing and elitist as a juxtaposition. It would be too easy to assume that equalization is good and elitism is bad. Because equality is a fundamental value in public policy. Let us look at the situation at hand, and allow me to rephrase the question a bit. In the discussion of eGovernment, we may discern policies that favor *redistribution* of benefit versus policies that tend to *concentrate* (or accumulate) values with a distinct group of people who were already ahead in a particular field. Neither is inherently good or bad. Redistribution serves the purpose of rebalancing values when an over-concentration begins to show a negative impact on society. On the other hand, if society is unproductive because of a planned economy (an over-equalization that eradicates individual production incentives), it may work as a stimulus to allow some to get rich first. Clearly, as contemporary Chinese history shows, we should not, however, expect a trickle-down to work entirely on its own. Hence, the opening-up and reform policies were attempted rebalanced with the “scientific outlook on development” which aimed at strengthening growth in the inland provinces. So, the redistribution–concentration dynamics live together in a dialectic relationship, which means the appropriateness of a policy is determined by its context. For eGovernment, seen as a policy, it implies that

we can imagine both directions, the technology does not determine how it is used. Consequently, when we assess how digital ICT affects the public administration, we should expect both dynamics to be visible.

The main conclusion from decades of research in ICT in government is that the introduction of new systems tends to reinforce the existing power relations.<sup>2</sup> By the introduction of the Internet, it was a common belief that the bottom-up structure of the technology would lead to a democratization of communication. In the early years, there were indeed some changes at the fringes of society, debate forums, and bulletin-board systems, but once governments got familiar with the Internet, they regulated it and shaped it to serve their purposes, thus reinforcing their power. Reinforcement does not imply stability, but instead that those who have power tend to be able to selectively adopt new technologies that suit their interests. In China, eGovernment has led to increased centralization within government and enhanced ability of the government to monitor the behavior of citizens. However, new actors have risen to power in the digital era, in particular the large Internet-platform companies. These companies have to take the cue from the political level, but the development has generated a new group of influential people. So, in that sense, the informatization has generated a new elite and a massive concentration of capital within a new sector.

With various student assistants over the years since 2012, I have assessed the websites of minority areas in Western China (more specifically, Xinjiang, Tibet, Guizhou, and Guangxi). As measured following a modified version of the UN e-government survey methodology, the websites have all made considerable progress in terms of website availability, functionality, and design. Arguably, it would have been more surprising if nothing had happened, given the general development in all things digital. However, the changes reflected more than just increased technological sophistication, they reflected clear policy priorities. In particular, the government websites had expanded their information and services in the areas of local culture industrial development, environmental protection, and development of human resources in rural settings. This could include information about local festivals and exhibitions, information about new rules of waste disposal, and job-databases and job-training opportunities for rural dwellers. Accordingly, in Western China, the websites are used as a platform for outreach in areas that the government deems important for the local development. We should remember that China is a world in itself, including areas of immense economic wealth as well as pockets of poverty. The struggle to

<sup>2</sup> Dutton and Danziger 1982

eradicate poverty is ongoing, a political top-priority, and local governments also try to leverage eGovernment to help both directly by, among others, collecting local job openings online, and indirectly by collecting statistical information in large databases used for development planning. So, in this way, there are attempts to make eGovernment work to equalize society.

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