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Exploring Online Structures on Chinese Government Portals

Citizen Political Participation and Government Legitimation

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This article explores the communicative structures of Chinese government web sites and their implications for citizen political participation. Taking issue with the party-state’s dubious claim of building a transparent, service-oriented, and democratic administration, the study analyzed web features on 31 Chinese provincial government portals. The UN’s e-participation framework was adapted to locate venues for citizen involvement. The results suggest that by manipulating online structures, Chinese government resorts to more subtle forms of online social control through information delivery, agenda setting, and containment of public dissent. Limited improvement in administrative efficiency and transparency serves the dual role of deflating social tension and reestablishing party legitimacy. Paradoxically, citizens’ political participation may generate unintended consequences of incremental reform of China’s local government and political institutions.

**Keywords:** China; government; democracy; control; participation; Internet; technology; web site; UN

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as e-mails, online chats, and e-forums have been increasingly used by governments to communicate with citizens. Of the 191 UN member states, 179 interact with citizens electronically (United Nations Online Network of Public Administration and Finance [UNPAN], 2006). Online information, service provision, and interaction are seen to shrink the distance between government and citizens and enhance political participation (Coleman & Gøtze, 2001). Despite their increasing prominence in public life, government web sites remain a marginal area of study in China that now boast the world’s largest Internet population of 253 million, 19.1% of its citizenry (China Internet Network Information Center [CNNIC], 2008).

Since early 1990s, China embarked on ICT building with 1 trillion yuan (US$121 billion) invested in government networks ranging from office automation, e-commerce promotion to government web sites (Yong, 2003, p. 83). These costly projects were touted...
officially to improve government–citizen relationships (People’s Daily Online, 2004). Given the one party-state’s patent suppression of dissidents and control of public opinion (Qiu, 2000), such assertions seem quite counterintuitive. However, dissenters use ICTs to challenge state authority (Chase & Mulvenon, 2002). Grassroots involvement also arguably raises hope for more accessible, effective, and accountable governance (Leib & He, 2006; Oksenberg, 1998). It will be unwise, some argue (e.g., Leib & He, 2006), to remain oblivious to significant changes that have taken place in China’s political landscape where Beijing’s interest in administrative efficiency and political legitimacy opens up opportunities for political reforms. This study thus takes issue with Chinese government’s claim to increase public participation through ICTs. If government web sites are intended to be transparent, service-oriented, and democratic as proclaimed, what online structures are in place for citizens to participate? What is their quality? In what ways do they enhance citizen participation? Or are they simply means to boost government legitimacy and forestall genuine democratic change? This article examines the current status, quality, and implications of China’s government web sites.

Literature Review

In this section, we provide an overview of the literature on online structures for citizen political participation and government legitimation, followed by a brief account of their development on Chinese government web sites.

Political Participation and Government Legitimation via Online Structures

Recently, political participation shifted notably from a focus on the procedural (e.g., open and competitive elections) to the substantive (e.g., empowerment and inclusiveness of citizens). This article adopts Delli Carpini’s (2006) definition of political participation as individual and collective actions to address public issues through institutions of the polity. Here, political participation is not only a form of governing, but also a way of cementing civil society according to the democratic principles of equality, civic rights, rule of law, and self-governance (Habermas, 1996). Increasingly, government information systems are expected to reflect the core values of participatory democracy (Barber, 1984), direct democracy (e.g., Cronin, 1989), and deliberative democracy (Dryzek, 2000). Recent ICT projects such as Minnesota’s Online Citizen Participation Opportunities and Santa Monica’s Budget Suggestions (Holzer & Kim, 2006) are celebrated as best US practices. Similar efforts in Britain are spearheaded by the Hansard Society to promote parliamentary participation (Chambers, 2003; Coleman & Gøtze, 2001). e-Europe is endorsed by EU to improve online political participation (Grönlund, 2003). Various East and Southeast Asian countries have also started adopting government web sites at impressive rates (UNPAN, 2006).

However, the dream of e-democracy has yet to overcome e-government practice that falls short of advancing authentic participation (Garson, 2003). Often times, new ICTs have been used by government to self-publicize and reassert its political legitimacy. Lipset (1959) defines legitimacy as “the capacity of a political system to engender and maintain
the belief that existing political institutions are the most appropriate or proper ones for the society’’ (p. 86). Government in the information age is compelled to adopt ICTs not simply to become more efficient in its bureaucracy and decision making, but to implement structures of signification, domination, and legitimation (Meijer & Zouridis, 2004). Although the virtual interface brings citizens closer to government and in some cases empower citizens, information, services, interaction, and participation are designed, controlled, and filtered by political elites and thus tend to solidify the government’s technical, symbolic, and political power. To make e-government more participatory, one must recognize how technology tends to reinforce existing social and political patterns (Margolis & Resnick, 2000), and how the “electronic face” of government is a symbolic architecture of power and legitimation (Chadwick, 2001).

Given government’s potential to both engage citizens and bolster its own legitimacy, the variety of government web site features that can facilitate or inhibit communication between government and citizens is of importance. We use the concept of “online structure” here to refer to a collection of online features that make actions and interactions possible. It is defined as “a particular electronic space, comprised of various html pages, features, links and texts, within which an individual is given an opportunity to act” (Schneider & Foot, 2002, p. 5). This definition distinguishes “structure” from “action.” Structure sets the stage for action as a “preferred” form of use, but action relies on the individual who may conform, transform, or oppose such use. Therefore, the existence of certain structures does not necessarily translate into action; rather they are enacted only when used by individuals or groups (Orlikowski, 2000). Moreover, the distinction between online structure and action implies that certain online structures are more conducive to actions than others. For instance, research shows that although links and texts tend to provide information, certain features of the ICTs such as online discussion forums can be used to foster more meaningful political conversations (Dahlberg, 1998). Noveck (2003) also contends that the design of online deliberative software can impose rules of communication and deliberation on users. When design choices become political choices, the deployment of online structures by government may well affect both the quality and outcome of citizen political participation.

Political Participation and Government Legitimation on Chinese Government web sites

As a one-party state, Chinese government inevitably faces the issue of legitimacy. Yet, unlike other socialist states such as Cuba, North Korea, and Vietnam that seek to limit the impact of the Internet, Beijing embraces it (Kalathil & Boas, 2003). The state began to adopt e-government later than most developed countries, but with official endorsement (Zhang, 2002); it is quickly catching up. At the provincial, city, and county levels, 100%, 93%, and 69% have official portals (CCID, 2006). Two major phases are discernible. The first involves 12 “Golden Projects” that established a national information system since 1993. These projects range from Golden Cards (to create unified banking systems) to Golden Tax (to curb tax evasion; Kluver, 2005). They bring order to China’s chaotic transition by increasing tax revenue and controlling corruption (Zhang, 2002). The second phase is “Government Online Project,” launched in 1999 that encourages government
agencies to use online administration, improve efficiency, and create linkages across regions. Chinese Government Online (http://www.govonline.cn), a gateway that provides technical solutions, serves as a platform for intergovernmental activities.

Obviously, Chinese government does not view the Internet as inherently liberating but rather something that can be configured and controlled while at the same time used to promote economic development and political legitimacy. Former Chinese president Jiang Zemin’s words on propaganda work resonate to this day: “seize with both hands, both hands must be strong,” meaning the base of Chinese Community Party’s (CCP) legitimacy relies on both economic growth and a renewed emphasis on political thought work (Brady, 2006). To strengthen the Party’s eroding legitimacy in an ever-expanding online sphere, CCP welcomed the new technology, adopted e-government while limiting the impact of the web, so although citizens’ access to the Internet has flourished, so has state control of the web via suppression of dissident use of the Net, discipline of cyber cafés (Chase & Mulvenon, 2002; Qiu, 2000), configuration of Internet gateway infrastructure (Boas, 2004), and Internet policing (Brady, 2006). Granted such control measures of censorship and self-censorship are never perfect, they are effective enough to maintain regime stability and protect local culture (Boas, 2004). In similar ways, Chinese e-government is monitored and censored to reinforce state surveillance, central planning, and control (Seifert & Chung, 2008), but it can also help China leapfrog into the information age, mitigate crisis of government legitimacy (Zhang, 2002), bring order to China’s social chaos (Kluver, 2005), and increase government efficiency and transparency without democratization (Hartford, 2005). Research shows that some underprivileged individuals are able to publish their grievances on government web sites (Hartford, 2005). Moreover, even though only 7.7% of China’s 137 million Internet users visit government web sites regularly (China Internet Network Information Center [CNNIC], 2007), they can be a critical mass for political activism.

As part of China’s administrative reform, government web sites serve multiple purposes. The rhetoric of censorship alone is not likely to fully capture their complexity. Kluver (2005) argued that the overwhelming focus on government control reflects only a small portion of the state use of its networks, as far more resources are devoted to infrastructure, administrative reform, and citizen participation. To be sure, in the past three decades, China has witnessed the demise of the communist ideology, erosion of the planned economy, and the party’s political legitimacy. Now, individuals and social groups do enjoy more economic and cultural freedoms (He, 1997). Civic participation in public affairs is seen in the growing consciousness of individual rights and self-protection via the legal system (Pei, 2000), increasing consumer rights (Zhao, 1998), and expansion of social organizations in numbers and independence (White, Howell, & Shang, 1996). Given the greater demands for political participation and growing pluralism in China, creating limited space for public opinion is more politically deft than outright suppression (He, 1997).

Such contingencies of soft containment provide an impetus for the current study of Chinese government web sites. We found that previous studies did not systematically examine government web sites’ structural implications for political participation or legitimation. Global level research that includes China as a case (e.g., UNPAN, 2006) pays little attention to social contexts and local dynamics. Theoretical and case studies (e.g., Hartford, 2005, Kluver, 2005; Zhang, 2002) are insightful yet lack explanatory power based on one or a few
cases. To counter limitations of previous research, this study adopts web content analysis (Gibson, Margolis, Resnich, & Ward, 2003) for its attention to online structures and implications for actions. Available content analysis of Chinese government web sites are mostly descriptions of web functions. Zhou (2004) coded the types of information and services on government web sites, but stopped short of gauging their quality for political participation or legitimation. Focusing on government transparency and citizen involvement, Lollar (2006) studied the presence of a few online structures on 29 Chinese provincial government web sites but did not systematically assess their quality and implications. The study confused asynchronous online forums with synchronous chat rooms, and omitted Shandong Province from the assessment. Because of lack of theoretical distinction, categories overlapped. For example, grievance and accusation boxes (under transparency) and Governor’s/Mayor’s mail box (under responsiveness) perform similar functions of gathering public opinion, and both arguably appeal to transparency and responsiveness. Finally, counting the mere presence of certain information and tools misses the more important questions about their quality.

As the literature review shows, current literature has neither adequately examined the diversity and quality of online structures of Chinese government web sites nor has it inquired systematically about such web sites’ structural potentials and limitations for political participation or legitimation. Hence, the study asks the following questions:

RQ1: Are Chinese citizens provided with a variety of online structures on Chinese government web sites for political participation?
RQ2: What is the quality of these online structures for political participation?
RQ3: What implications do such online structures have for citizen political participation and government legitimation?

Method

In this section, we introduce the e-participation framework, used by the United Nations (UN) to evaluate government web sites worldwide. This model is adapted to analyze the online features on 31 Chinese provincial government portals to explore their implications.

E-participation Framework Revisited

The study revises the e-participation framework used by the UN to assess the effectiveness of national government web sites in engaging citizens in public affairs worldwide (UNPAN, 2006). This framework, exerting global influence on government ICT discourse and projects, comprises three dimensions: (a) e-information, (b) e-consultation, and (c) e-decision making. E-information refers to government information provision of laws, regulations, and policies. E-consultation denotes inclusion of citizens in public discussions, and e-decision making emphasizes government feedback to citizen input. However, some scholars (e.g., Ainsworth, Hardy, & Harely, 2005; Chadwick, 2003) suggest that government’s mere collection of public opinions, not unlike opinion polls, differs fundamentally from open discussions that are closer to the ideal of deliberation on public affairs. To reflect this

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distinction, the revised e-participation framework distinguishes e-consultation from e-discussion. The former focuses on linear, vertical communication between a single citizen and government where the government solicits and collects information from the citizen without allowing a third party to participate discussions. Although e-petitions and polls reflect such technological designs, e-discussion allows for dialogues between citizens, civil institutions, and policy makers on policy issues. To account for the imperfections of online discussions in government web spaces, the term “e-discussion” is used to approximate the ideal of open public deliberations.

Data Collection and Analysis

To assess the online structures on Chinese government web sites, all 31 provincial government portals were selected. Table 1 provides portal URL addresses and background information such as provincial gross domestic product (GDP), populations, and Internet populations.

The selection of provincial portals is based on two major reasons. First, unlike national government web sites that focus primarily on agenda setting or the local ones that are often underfunded, portals at the provincial level have more resources and attract more citizens’ attention (People’s Daily Online, 2004). Second, such a selection allows for systematic comparisons at the provincial level. Logistically, given the focus on citizen–government communication, the study does not consider government intranets accessible only to government employees or information and services tailored to business, tourists, investors, and foreigners, so English versions of the portals containing tourist and investment information were excluded. Also, as provincial governments adopt a “one-stop-shopping” strategy, the study accessed their central portals without starting from subsidiary agency web sites (e.g., those of the financial or police departments). The scope and depth of each portal is defined by its site map that displays the entire portal’s table of contents. Of 31 provinces, 26 use such a tool to guide users’ navigation. For those without site maps, researchers relied on navigation bars on each web site’s homepage to locate the major types of information and services offered by the provinces.

Previous web content studies of government web sites (CCID, 2006; Gibson et al., 2003; Holzer & Kim, 2006; Lollar, 2006; UNPAN, 2006; Zhou, 2004) identified some online structures. To further locate structures unique in the Chinese contexts, researchers collected domain names of provincial government portals from Chinese Government Online gateway, visited them all, and developed a coding scheme with 20 major types of online structures for political participation (see Table 2). Similar to UN’s study (UNPAN, 2006), each structure was evaluated qualitatively on a scale of 0–3 with attention to quality, quantity, and frequency of information provision by government or use by citizens. For instance, many provinces have adopted an online petition system that allows users to report government or business excesses. Its absence from a provincial portal results in a “0.” Another province may have adopted it only recently that effective use is next to none. In such a case, it scores “1” for having the structure in place. A province rated “2” tends to have sporadic input every month while one that scores “3” has dozens of petitions displayed online every month as a result of steady contributions from users.
## Table 1
Chinese Provinces: GDP, Population, Internet Users, and Government Portals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regional GDP, 1 million Yuan (Year 2003)</th>
<th>Population 1,000 persons (Year 2005)</th>
<th>Internet Users, 1,000 persons (Year 2005)</th>
<th>Provincial E-Gov, Portal URL Address (Year 2007)</th>
<th>web site, Site Map (Yes/No)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Four metropolises</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>366,310</td>
<td>14,560</td>
<td>4,280</td>
<td><a href="http://www.beijing.gov.cn">http://www.beijing.gov.cn</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shanghai</td>
<td>625,081</td>
<td>17,110</td>
<td>4,630</td>
<td><a href="http://www.shanghai.gov.cn">http://www.shanghai.gov.cn</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tianjing</td>
<td>244,766</td>
<td>10,110</td>
<td>2,290</td>
<td><a href="http://www.tj.gov.cn">http://www.tj.gov.cn</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chongqing</td>
<td>225,056</td>
<td>31,300</td>
<td>1890</td>
<td><a href="http://www">http://www</a> cq.gov.cn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twenty-two Provinces</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anhui</td>
<td>397,238</td>
<td>64,100</td>
<td>2,760</td>
<td><a href="http://www.ah.gov.cn">http://www.ah.gov.cn</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fujian</td>
<td>523,217</td>
<td>34,880</td>
<td>3,970</td>
<td><a href="http://www.fujian.gov.cn">http://www.fujian.gov.cn</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gansu</td>
<td>130,460</td>
<td>26,030</td>
<td>1,250</td>
<td><a href="http://www.gansu.gov.cn">http://www.gansu.gov.cn</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guangdong</td>
<td>1362,587</td>
<td>79,540</td>
<td>14,860</td>
<td><a href="http://www.gd.gov.cn">http://www.gd.gov.cn</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guizhou</td>
<td>135,611</td>
<td>38,700</td>
<td>1,090</td>
<td><a href="http://www.gzgov.gov.cn">http://www.gzgov.gov.cn</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hainan</td>
<td>67,093</td>
<td>8,110</td>
<td>690</td>
<td><a href="http://www.hainan.gov.cn">http://www.hainan.gov.cn</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hebei</td>
<td>709,856</td>
<td>67,690</td>
<td>4,860</td>
<td><a href="http://www.hebei.gov.cn">http://www.hebei.gov.cn</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heilongjiang</td>
<td>443,000</td>
<td>38,150</td>
<td>3,160</td>
<td><a href="http://www.hlj.gov.cn">http://www.hlj.gov.cn</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Hubei</td>
<td>540,171</td>
<td>60,020</td>
<td>4,630</td>
<td><a href="http://www.hubei.gov.cn">http://www.hubei.gov.cn</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunan</td>
<td>463,873</td>
<td>66,630</td>
<td>3,480</td>
<td><a href="http://www.hunan.gov.cn">http://www.hunan.gov.cn</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jiangsu</td>
<td>1,246,083</td>
<td>74,060</td>
<td>7,900</td>
<td><a href="http://www.jiangsu.gov.cn">http://www.jiangsu.gov.cn</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jiangxi</td>
<td>283,046</td>
<td>42,540</td>
<td>1,870</td>
<td><a href="http://www.jiangxi.gov.cn">http://www.jiangxi.gov.cn</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jilin</td>
<td>252,262</td>
<td>27,040</td>
<td>2,010</td>
<td><a href="http://www.jl.gov.cn">http://www.jl.gov.cn</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liaoning</td>
<td>600,254</td>
<td>42,100</td>
<td>3,720</td>
<td><a href="http://www.ln.gov.cn">http://www.ln.gov.cn</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qinghai</td>
<td>39,021</td>
<td>5,340</td>
<td>290</td>
<td><a href="http://www.qh.gov.cn">http://www.qh.gov.cn</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shaanxi</td>
<td>239,858</td>
<td>36,900</td>
<td>3,140</td>
<td><a href="http://www.shaanxi.gov.cn">http://www.shaanxi.gov.cn</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shandong</td>
<td>1,243,593</td>
<td>91,250</td>
<td>9,880</td>
<td><a href="http://www.sd.gov.cn">http://www.sd.gov.cn</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shanxi</td>
<td>625,081</td>
<td>33,140</td>
<td>2,690</td>
<td><a href="http://www.shanxigov.cn">http://www.shanxigov.cn</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sichuan</td>
<td>245,659</td>
<td>87,000</td>
<td>6,090</td>
<td><a href="http://www.sc.gov.cn">http://www.sc.gov.cn</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yunnan</td>
<td>246,529</td>
<td>43,760</td>
<td>2,410</td>
<td><a href="http://www.yn.gov.cn">http://www.yn.gov.cn</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhejiang</td>
<td>939,500</td>
<td>46,800</td>
<td>7,070</td>
<td><a href="http://www.zhejiang.gov.cn">http://www.zhejiang.gov.cn</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five autonomous regions</td>
<td>Regional GDP, 1 million Yuan (Year 2003)</td>
<td>Population 1,000 persons (Year 2005)</td>
<td>Internet Users, 1,000 persons (Year 2005)</td>
<td>Provincial E-Gov, Portal URL Address (Year 2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guangxi</td>
<td>273,513</td>
<td>48,570</td>
<td>3,300</td>
<td><a href="http://www.gxzf.gov.cn">http://www.gxzf.gov.cn</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neimenggu</td>
<td>215,041</td>
<td>23,800</td>
<td>1,160</td>
<td><a href="http://www.nmg.gov.cn">http://www.nmg.gov.cn</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ningxia</td>
<td>38,534</td>
<td>5,800</td>
<td>320</td>
<td><a href="http://www.ningxia.gov.cn">http://www.ningxia.gov.cn</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Tibet</td>
<td>18,450</td>
<td>2,700</td>
<td>90</td>
<td><a href="http://info.tibet.cn/news/zfzx">http://info.tibet.cn/news/zfzx</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xinjiang</td>
<td>187,761</td>
<td>19,340</td>
<td>1,260</td>
<td><a href="http://www.xinjiang.gov.cn">http://www.xinjiang.gov.cn</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Figures of regional gross domestic product (GDP) and populations were retrieved from China National Statistic Bureau (http://www.stats.gov.cn). 1 Yuan (or Chinese RMB) is worth roughly US$0.12. Statistics of Internet users by region are available from China Internet Network Information Center’s (CNNIC) 2006 January Report. Metropolises and autonomous regions have equal administrative power as provinces.
Table 2
Evaluation of Online Structures on 31 Chinese Provincial Government web sites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Further Explanation</th>
<th>0 (%)</th>
<th>1 (%)</th>
<th>2 (%)</th>
<th>3 (%)</th>
<th>(\kappa)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E-information</td>
<td>Agencies</td>
<td>Agencies, leaders</td>
<td>Government agencies, leaders’ profiles</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Staffing</td>
<td>Staff recruitment</td>
<td>Recruitment procedures, updates</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Laws, plans</td>
<td>Law, regulations</td>
<td>Important state, provincial laws</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Documents</td>
<td>Gov. documents</td>
<td>Latest government decisions, announcements</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial information</td>
<td>Budget, spending</td>
<td>Documents of government budget, spending</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Useful information</td>
<td>Service guide</td>
<td>Procedure, contact, agency, time, fees</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>News &amp; outreach</td>
<td>News &amp; outreach links for citizens</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>.97</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>List-serv or RSS feed</td>
<td>Customized information delivery</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>26</td>
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<td>Answer questions of daily concern</td>
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<td>Citizen input box</td>
<td>Singleton input to government policy</td>
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<td>Citizen chat with policy makers</td>
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<td>13</td>
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<td>Explains decision-making procedures</td>
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<td>Polls used for decision making</td>
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<td>Government replies/resolves petitions</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Feedback to input &amp; forum questions</td>
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<td>29</td>
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Note: The coding scheme is divided into 4 dimensions, 12 categories, and 20 items. Similar to UN’s method, the study evaluated each item qualitatively on a scale of 0–3 with attention to quality, quantity, and frequency of information provision by government or use by citizens: 0 = item absent; 1 = item present, information poor in quality, inadequate in quantity, infrequently updated, generates little participation (if an interactive item); 2 = item present, information relatively detailed, updated regularly (biweekly or monthly), generates some participation (if an interactive item); 3 = item present, rich information, adequate in quantity, updated frequently (e.g., weekly), generates regular participation (if an interactive item). The percentages of provinces, evaluated ranging from 0 to 3 for each item, are tabulated in Table 2. The last column reports the Cohen’s Kappa (k) for each item. Comprehensive coding scheme is available on request.
Although by no means exhaustive, the set of online structures offers a closer look at information, services, and user activities on Chinese provincial government portals. The two authors randomly selected and coded seven provincial portals independently as a pilot. After resolving discrepancies and improving the coding scheme, we evaluated all 31 portals separately between December 15 and December 30, 2007. The coding scheme was relatively reliable with all measures scoring .84 or higher using Cohen’s Kappa (see Table 2). Afterward, we clarified our disagreements by comparing notes taken during the coding process and reached consensus about the score for each item on all portals. It should be noted that the evaluation offers a snapshot of these portals at the end of 2007, although periodical reevaluation may portray their development over time.

Results and Interpretations

Data analysis revealed a range of previously unavailable institutional structures for Chinese citizens to engage in public affairs. However, their quality varies substantially across the four dimensions of e-participation. Provincial government portals appear to be much better at delivering information and collecting public opinion than encouraging civic discussions or incorporating public opinion into decision-making processes.

E-information: The Propaganda State Lives On

Analysis of the e-information dimension points to the persistence of state propaganda with changing tactics and dynamics. As shown in Figure 1, except for widely adopting technological features such as list-serv or RSS feed for information distribution, almost all provincial web sites offer a number of e-information features ranging from profiles for agencies and leaders to service guides.

These web sites rank high on features that require disclosure of nonsensitive information such as profiles for agencies and leaders (90% ranked at 3 for providing rich information), laws and regulations (81% ranked at 3), news and outreach links (81% ranked at 3), government documents of latest government decisions and announcements (77% ranked at 3), and service guides (77% ranked at 3). Yet, despite increased transparency, crucial information regarding staff recruitment, budgeting and spending is still far from adequate disclosure. Half of the provincial portals report very little on expenditure, if at all.

It should be noted that service information that was previously a conundrum to many Chinese citizens has been made available through various service guides. Shanghai, for instance, not only displays information about government agencies and procedures for services ranging from real estate to health care, but also links to subsidiary departments and consultative functions. In addition, thanks to the online platform, privileged access to information, and thus power has gradually moved into the purview of the public domain. Previously, Kluver (2005) noted that systematic distortion of information plagues the Chinese government in such a way that information is rarely disclosed to people outside the official hierarchies. Now, for example, e-procurement or government online purchase has been enabled in almost all provinces to curb corruption by connecting provincial systems to the central government under the Finance Ministry. Beijing uses list-serv to
update subscribers on topics ranging from politics to people’s daily life. Other provinces like Anhui, Guangdong, and Liaoning allow users to receive updates through RSS feeds.

It seems that provincial governments still retain control over content but attempt to allay public antagonism by addressing information asymmetry and corruption. However, Beijing has consolidated its propaganda in cyberspace by adopting a service-oriented approach while providing little information on budgeting or spending. However, disclosure of previously guarded information such as bidding and housing helps build accountability and efficiency of modern bureaucracies (Hartford, 2005). Although Lynch (1999) argued that China’s propaganda machinery has been severely undermined by bureaucratic fragmentation and technological advances, the state’s recent use of ICTs for political patrol convolutes the claim of the demise of the propaganda state. The “symbolic environment” promoted by the party to increase its legitimacy (Lynch, 1999) has morphed to embody certain features of transparency and service to absorb the stress of accelerated industrialization and urbanization as a result of economic reforms.

### E-consultation: Politics That Care About What We Think?

E-consultation refers to vertical mechanisms for governments to electronically solicit public opinions for policy making without initiating dialogues among stakeholders. The study identifies four major modes of e-consultation on Chinese government portals: Q&A with government, e-petition (or online Xinfang), online opinion polls, and citizen input box. As shown in Figure 2, many provincial web sites rank relatively high on e-petitions (61% ranked at 3), citizen input boxes (58% ranked at 3), and Q&A (45% ranked at 3).
Q&A with government addresses citizens’ daily questions such as how to obtain a business license, where to take a certificate exam or how to transfer a medical insurance. Data indicate that half of the provinces streamlined their operations and provided staff support to handle such questions. If citizens are helped in a timely fashion, this structure can vastly boost government legitimacy. For example, residents of Guizhou praise the practice that has effectively handled a monthly average of 200 questions since May 2003.

Unlike Q&A with government, e-petition (or online Xinfang) handles more serious citizen grievances of official misconduct. Xinfang, which means “letters and visits” in Chinese, has been strategically used for over half a century allowing petitioners to resolve their grievances outside the formal legal system by pleading to high-ranking officials (Minzner, 2006). Previously offline, Xinfang went online, sanctioned by the state decree Regulations on Letters and Visits. Currently, two thirds of provincial portals adopted e-petition in various forms such as Governor’s or Mayor’s box, petition box, and complaint box. The degree of information disclosure varies: Some provinces such as Gansu display selected government responses; others (e.g., Hainan and Chongqin) display both citizens’ letters and government replies, as shown in Figure 3.

Guizhou also provides a monthly summary of petitions and responses. Citizen petitions range from housing, labor, and business to serious legal violations. In one case, a farmer from Chongqin reported that villagers’ reimbursement for reconverting farmland to forests was withheld by the village’s party secretary who ridiculed their course of action online. It was reported later that compensation was returned, but it is unclear whether the local party secretary in question was prosecuted.

At its best, online Xinfang uses the grassroots to pressure government to behave and puts a check on rampant corruption. Hartford (2005) observes that this feature is welcomed by citizens when grievances are adjudicated. Online Xinfang, however, is limited on several accounts. First, Xinfang hardly goes beyond individual cases to systematically rectify administrative problems. Second, the interaction between a single citizen and the government rarely extends to a wider public dialogue to seek solutions. Third, online Xinfang...
or its offline counterpart falls outside the formal court system. With an annual rate of 11.5 million petitions, Xinfang may seem a viable solution to alleviate pressure on the formal legal system, but it also tends to fuel social instability because of the lack of consistency and may drag development of the rule of law (Minzner, 2006).

Aside from Q&A with government and online Xinfang, e-consultation structures also include opinion polls and input boxes. The former, often used in a multiple choice format, can be guilty of predetermined policy parameters. One third of 31 provinces use opinion polls on a regular basis with results displayed. Hainan’s also allows for open-ended user comments. Search engines enable search by category as well as related agencies, key words, or business tracking numbers.

Note: This figure was captured from http://www.hainan.gov.cn/code/V3/wsxf/1.php? on December 18, 2007. Emoticons and other icons represent different categories of entries such as citizen complaints, exposure of malpractice, and citizen suggestions. Search engines enable search by category as well as related agencies, key words, or business tracking numbers.
In addition to polls, citizen input boxes invite open-ended suggestions from individual citizens on policy issues yet do not encourage interactions between users. In terms of format, some portals display individual inputs while others do not. Hainan integrates this online structure with Q&A and online Xinfang for consultation, suggestion, and petition. Its search engine can sort results by different criteria such as key words and dock number.

Unlike e-information, e-consultation allows provincial governments to “listen to” citizens. The government’s image can be improved as a result when features such as online Xinfang help citizens defend their rights and curb corruption. The effectiveness of such features, however, depends largely on the local government’s consistency in responding to citizens’ questions and input. The improvement in bureaucratic operations, as Hartford (2005) observes, is more of an effort to ease the pressure on urban economic growth and governance rather than a stride in participatory democracy.

E-discussion: Experiments with Deliberative Democracy in China?

Two major structures are examined here where government portals offer limited space for citizen discourse: Real-time “Gov. Chat” between citizens and policy makers and asynchronous policy discussion forums between citizens and other stakeholders. Not surprisingly, these interactive features were not well implemented, as shown in Figure 4.

Close to half of the provincial government web sites do not have a policy forum, and about 40% without a Gov. Chat function. However, about a quarter of all provincial government web sites have quite active policy forums and Gov. chat functions.

Used in more than half of provincial portals, Gov. Chat gives netizens access to policy discussions with officials and other stakeholders. The ones in Hainan, Hunan, and Jiangsu stood out. Chat sessions are announced ahead of time, moderated by official media, with transcripts and videos posted online afterward. These sessions take two forms: Online hearings and moderated chats with provincial leaders. In November 2005, Chongqin Legislative Council held the first online legislative hearing in China. Members of local legislative council, people’s congress, law enforcement, the media as well as citizen representatives, and local lawyers gathered to discuss law enforcement issues with netizens. Similarly, Zhejiang held a legislative public hearing on property management in 2006. In a format involving fewer stakeholders, members of Shanghai’s People’s Congress chatted online with citizens on environmental protection regulations. Given the state domination in resources and representation, discussions tend to be skewed in favor of the government. Similar to other state propaganda that creates the illusion of inclusion, Gov. Chat seems to encourage limited participation, not participatory democracy.

Policy forum, another discursive means of participation, is implemented in half of all provincial portals. Unlike e-consultation, forums allow users to post new topics and comment on each other’s postings. In Zhejiang, such an online structure attracted as many as 200 postings every month since its inception in September 2004. Guangdong’s has a monthly average of about 1,000 entries since 2003, compared to an international average of 10 entries per month on similar government forums (Gronlund, 2003). Other provinces such as Hainan, Guizhou, and Shandong also have also witnessed sustainable development in their forums though these forums vary in accessibility. Hainan’s forum does not require registration to post an entry, but Zhejiang’s asks participants to log in to publish articles in
five categories including Current Affairs, Policy Recommendations, and Government Efficiency. Despite their relatively open format, these forums are monitored by web masters who can delete “sensitive” entries, for instance, those directly attacking government legitimacy rather than specific local officials and policies. Such maneuvers often result in users’ subsequent “protesting” entries against censorship.

Given the domination of government discourse and the lack of user participation, the effectiveness of Gov. Chat and policy forums is questionable. Gov. Chat rarely convenes all involved parties in real time to discuss policy issues and is sometimes confined to harmless chats between government officials such as those in Beijing and Shanghai. Even when the chats involve citizens, the topics are often handpicked to avoid confrontation. Beijing’s legislative office, for example, invites public debate on relatively “safe” policy topics such as energy conservation and monthly bus tickets, while more pointed subjects such as health care and pension systems were raised online recently at Beijing Political Consultative Conference hosted on Sina.com, a popular commercial portal. In addition, although online forums do allow for lively discussions among citizens, the lack of visible government commitment to solving policy problems raised in these discussions tends to reduce the forums to ranting sites. Unless citizens are well represented in public hearings, chats, and forums, and their opinions taken seriously through more institutionalized arrangements such as citizen jury, such discursive online structures risk losing their potency altogether. Legalization of public hearings in China (McCormick, 2006) and government feedback loops may provide the much needed and more profound institutional changes for these discursive online structures.

E-decision-making: The Inadequacy of Government Feedback

The study found that similar to e-discussion, the online structures for e-decision making on provincial government portals are severely underdeveloped (see Figure 5).

Although more than 60% of portals publicize policy makers’ contact information and their respective responsibilities online, almost half of the portals do not provide adequate knowledge on decision-making procedures. The lack of such political information reflects in reality the exclusion of citizens from local political processes. Furthermore, online structures enabling feedback via polls, petitions, and citizen input forums are absent from around
30% of portals, let alone integrating users’ opinions and recommendations into government policy making.

However, some provinces started to experiment: Providing feedback to specific citizen petitions and input as well as elite legislative bills. For example, Jiangxi’s portal publishes 10 specific government responses to citizens’ input or petitions through “People’s Voice Channel” every 2 weeks on government’s handling of civil disputes and specific policy changes. In December 2007, the provincial government intervened when a company from the City of Fuzhou refused to process 110 employees’ applications for retirement and medical insurance because of incomplete documentation. However, instead of responding to a limited number of inquiries, provinces like Hunan and Hainan provide regular follow-ups to each citizen’s online petition by allocating the cases to subsidiary agencies. The status of these cases is published online, although it is not clear whether users can contest the results. These online structures help deter business or government misconducts and are likely to improve government image and local politics.

In addition, some portals take up legislative proposals submitted by representatives of local political consultative conference and people’s congress that target government inefficiency, economic, and social development. Government feedback addresses the issues raised and provides update. Although most proposals and feedback discuss policy in a superficial manner, others engender specific changes. For example, Song Xiaoju, representative of Chongqin Municipal Consultative Conference, recommended improving the Mayor’s hotline by replacing a single operator with a call center and increasing its media coverage. Her suggestion was adopted and improved hotline service considerably.

Intricately tied to other dimensions, e-decision making is the apex of e-participation as it relates to self-governance. Government is expected to take citizen input into account during decision making and provide feedback on the outcome of specific issues. Like e-discussion, this dimension is noted for its gross insufficiency, if not complete absence, in provincial portals. Although this is a common phenomenon experienced elsewhere in the world (Gronlund, 2003), China’s situation is further complicated by the lack of a system of

![E-Decision Making](image-url)
accountability. Because officials are selected, not elected, they can hardly be held liable by the public for their decisions (He, 1997). In addition, the political system also suffers from a weak legislature to build formal lines of communication between representatives and citizens. Current e-decision making structures fail to incorporate citizen opinions toward self-governance. Scarcity of citizen feedback loops threatens the fundamental existence of other dimensions in the e-participation framework.

Discussion

Data analysis of 31 Chinese provincial portals highlights a number of issues of political participation and legitimation in Chinese government portals. In addition to enhancing government legitimacy, propaganda, surveillance, and censorship, some provincial governments are interested in and capable of using online structures to interact with local residents and maintain social order. However, the online structures that enable or disable citizen participation in local politics are unevenly implemented across the provinces and the four dimensions of the e-participation framework.

First, it appears that Chinese provincial government portals are implemented mainly for information distribution and gathering. Not only does e-information promote government propaganda, e-consultation also enables the state to collect public opinions. It serves the dual role of deflating social tension and reestablishing Party legitimacy while pushing the government toward more transparency and accountability. E-discussion online structures, much weaker in comparison, experiment to accommodate citizens’ voices in local politics, but are currently dictated by government discourse and monitoring without obvious impact to truly affect local policy making. The scarcity of government responses in the e-decision making dimension further contradicts the government’s promise of administrative transparency, service, and democracy.

Second, despite boosting state control and legitimacy, Chinese government portals seem to open up some political space for citizens. Increased disclosure of budget and e-procurement information provides glimpses into the government’s financial sector, previously secluded from the general public. E-consultation enhances transparency through streamlined online services, e-petition, and Q&A with government. In particular, e-petition not only promotes citizen awareness of individual rights and legal protection, but also helps resolve disputes, and to a limited extent alleviates infringement on civic rights. Additionally, e-discussion features such as Gov. Chat offers citizens insight into the public hearing system. Online forums provide restricted discursive space for citizens to articulate their opinions and tend to enhance political knowledge. Government feedback, though far from sufficiency, are welcoming signs of greater accountability.

The existence of certain online features that enable citizens to participate in local politics, however, should not be mistaken for participatory or deliberative democracy: The former are sporadic individual and collective actions with the intention to address public issues through institutions of the polity; the latter are attributes of a democratic state. In a one-party-dominated country where neither competitive elections nor civil rights or the rule of law are guaranteed, it is too whimsical to accept just about any form of grassroots activities as a sign of deliberative democracy (Leib & He, 2006). Fishkin’s recent success of
deliberative polling in China (McCormick, 2006) is perhaps better seen as confirmation of the potential for grassroots deliberation rather than an institutional overhaul. Although some online actions embody elements of participation and deliberation, it is theoretically tenuous to equate them with the practice of participatory or deliberative democracy.

Third, the portals’ emphasis on information and transactional services over political interactions is a testament to the Party’s push for “responsive bureaucracy” (Hartford, 2005). Hartford explained it well that the problem of China’s bureaucracy is not that there is too much of it. Rather, it is the substitution of Weberian “impersonal” bureaucracy with “guanxi” that corrupts Chinese politics. Hence, the adoption of office automation, e-procurement, online taxation, and e-petition systems is positive in the sense that as it puts local governments and officials under scrutiny. Provincial government portals, therefore, not only oversee certain citizen online activities, but also provide central government the means to monitor local government performance. It tends to increase government efficiency, transparency, and accountability while limiting the scope for arbitrary decisions and abuses of power.

Our study does find some features on Chinese government portals for citizen political participation. This is an improvement from the past when none of these features existed. In many ways, Chinese government portals are remarkably similar to their Western counterpart: They provide few opportunities for citizen interaction and focus mainly on service delivery and political propaganda (Seifert & Chung, 2008). These findings point to certain Western bias toward citizen participation that tends to ignore the possibility and the experience of Chinese citizens’ involvement in public affairs. Our study shows that to establish its legitimacy and maintain social control, Chinese government, like its Western counterparts, provide opportunities for citizens to report their grievances online and address their complaints. However, the appearance of a few interactive online features on Chinese government portals is not an indication that China is heading rapidly in a positive direction to genuinely increase citizen political participation. Rather, the use of Chinese government portals has to be interpreted in its unique sociopolitical contexts as the one-party state’s strategic adaptation in an online environment.

These developments suggest a more complex view on Chinese government web sites. The central government not only attempts to enhance its legitimacy and contain political opposition through online monitoring, filtering, censoring, and propagandizing (Chase & Mulvenon, 2002) but also grant limited yet expanding space for citizen political participation. Beijing’s leverage of grassroots activism against the arbitrariness of local governments presents opportunities for greater administrative accountability. Chinese provincial portals, while boosting state legitimacy, allow users to use online structures to seek information and services, petition the government, debate public issues, and protect their civic rights. Albeit strained, such citizen–government interactions hold some potential for citizen participation in local politics.

**Conclusion**

This study adapted the UN e-participation framework for political participation, identified and evaluated 20 types of online structures through which Chinese citizens interact
with provincial governments. By contextualizing ICT use, the study provides a more nuanced understanding of the structural potentials and limitations of Chinese government web sites. Our results speak to the dialectical tensions between Beijing’s desire to maintain its political legitimacy and the necessity it feels to grant citizens some opportunities for political participation as a minor concession to stabilize its rule.

Our study shows Chinese government is not only able to restrain civil liberties, but is also capable of adapting. By manipulating online structures, government resorts to more subtle forms of social control through information delivery, agenda setting, and containment of public dissent. Limited improvement in administrative efficiency and transparency serves the dual role of deflating social tension and reestablishing party legitimacy. Paradoxically, constrained political participation may generate unintended consequences of gradual reform of China’s local governance and political institutions. Public’s demands for rights to political information, government services, and social justice have pressured local governments to reduce arbitrariness and behave responsibly. Citizens can improve their lives and participate in public affairs through structures of e-information, e-consultation, e-discussion, and e-decision making. However, the same structures that enable citizens to participate are also under the government’s close monitoring. Such surveillance allows government to respond strategically to citizen demands while at the same time can produce incremental adaptations on the part of the regime, which may eventually change the nature of the regime (Shambaugh, 2008).

We believe technologies are not innately participatory or emancipatory. Instead, they are embedded in unique political and cultural environments (Sassen, 2005) and the use of technologies is negotiated in various social contexts through situated human practice (Orlikowski, 2000). The various structural features of Chinese government web sites pertaining to political participation are a result of conscious decisions and practices of local government agencies and citizens. Given the right circumstances, technologies may amplify and facilitate positive causes as well as negative ones. The Internet is not in and of itself a cause for social and political change. The ultimate power of change resides with the people and the self-governing institutions they create.

Our study suggests that beyond democratic elections, rights-seeking civic actions that aim at improving individual welfare, social well-being, and institutional justice are part of a larger movement toward greater political participation in China. Although outright political opposition is proscribed, common ground exists between citizens and the state on enhancing local mechanisms of accountability. This is not to preclude the desirability or possibility of more radical change of political structures. Rather, it invites alternative strategies of political participation in China’s sociopolitical contexts.

Our study has several limitations that may be addressed by future research. First, the study offers only a snapshot of the status of provincial government portals at the end of year 2007. A longitudinal may yield more telling results of their progress. Second, more coders and longer training sessions may improve intercoder reliability. Third, we were not able to explore all four dimensions of the e-participation framework in detail given the priority to provide a bird’s eye view of online structures on government portals. Future analysis may look into the use and effects of specific types such as online service guide, e-petition, opinion polls, and in particular, Gov. Chat and policy forums for a richer understanding of the dynamics for civic participation and public deliberation. Fourth, the study analyzed online structures with regard
to their qualities and general use through content analysis. However, this method offers little insight into the motivations of public servants, design decisions, or users’ demographics, experiences and perceptions. Last if not the least, besides provincial portals, other online platforms such as commercial online news, forums, blogs, people’s congress, and people’s consultative conferences web sites could also be locales of research interest.

Despite persistent state censorship, the study detects emergent trends of political participation through various online structures in Chinese government portals. Resorting to soft control, the state has become more adept at setting public agenda, regulating discourse, and managing social order to maintain its legitimacy in the information age. Citizens are also gaining political knowledge and access to local politics. In this dialectic process, online structures are mediums, not causes of the gradual political evolution. We believe innovative ICT use and institutional change can be both top-down and bottom-up by engaging a coalition of progressive leaders and users. Within the confines of state-sanctioned space, online structures hold potential for more open and responsible governance and thus grant cautious optimism for rights-centered participation.

References


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