

# Government 2.0 in Authoritarian China: Progress, Pitfalls and Prospect

By Liang Ma

Government 2.0 is the use of Web 2.0 technologies by public sector to prompt transparency, participation, and collaboration. Facebook, Twitter, and other social media applications are censored in China, but ironically government agencies and civil servants are active in using their domestic versions. This article reviews the latest development of Government 2.0 in China, identifies its key pitfalls, and provides policy suggestions to guide its future boom.

Web 2.0 technologies refer to social media applications like blog, RSS, microblogging, and instant chat tools. In comparison with its predecessors, Web 1.0 technologies such as browser and E-mail, Web 2.0 technologies are characterized by freedom, openness, multimedia, interactivity, sharing and collaboration. Web 2.0 technologies highlight crowded wisdom and its potential in engaging the public has rapidly been seized by democratic politicians and public managers. Government 2.0 is the use of Web 2.0 technologies by public sector in advancing transparency, participation, and collaboration within and beyond the boundary of government. Such technologies and applications are assumed to be rejected by authoritarian bureaucracy in China, however, believe it or not, public sector in China has been warmly embracing Web 2.0 technologies (Ma 2013, 2014).

Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other applications are officially censored from accessing in Mainland China, but its domestic versions boom. Weibo and Tencent, the Chinese version of Twitter and Facebook, have attracted millions of users and dominated public opinion in China. Although politically sensitive posts in these platforms may be censored by government, online expressions of sentiments are generally tolerable. Government agencies and civil servants at various levels and across diverse regions join in the bandwagon to harness Web 2.0 technologies to engage and outreach citizens online. Why authoritarian bureaucracy in China, in contrast to outside observers' expectation, takes advantage of the cutting-edge information technologies? What characterizes their strategies? What implications can be drawn from their practices? This article aims to review the latest development of Government 2.0 in China and provide preliminary evidences to answer these questions.

## **The State of the Art of Government 2.0 in China**

### **The background of e-government development in China**

The use of information technology (IT) in public sector in China can be traced to the late 1990s when its telecommunication network was firstly connected to the World Internet Network. A top-down approach was adopted to prompt government agencies

to open web portals by the State Council, the cabinet of China, and numerous financial, technological and personnel resources have been put to support the development of electronic government over the past two decades. Nowadays almost all governments at or above the county level have opened official web portals, and public services have increasingly been delivered online. As demonstrated by the survey of United Nations (UN 2012), China's e-government still bottoms among over 190 countries but has witnessed its remarkable improvement. Large cities such as Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangzhou, have developed mature e-government system and their functionality is almost on a par with that of Western developed countries. Web portals of governments and their branches at lower levels and in inland regions, however, are commonly seldom updated and dysfunctional.

The amount of Internet users in China (591 million) tops in the World, and its users account for roughly 20 percent of global netizens. The Internet penetration rate in China is 44.1 percent, thanks to the rapid diffusion and use of mobile phones (CNNIC 2013). The total number of government websites in China has surged notably to be 53,776, but its share of total amount of domains has shrunk to 0.7 percent (CNNIC 2013). In other words, citizens have a probability of one-hundredth to access a government website randomly. The recent survey of the Lien Chinese Cities Service-Oriented Government Program at Nanyang Technological University also echoes such conjecture. Using an eleven-point scale ranging from 0 (never) to 10 (mostly), we telephone interviewed 25,958 citizens in 36 major cities to rate their frequency to access government website in the focal cities. The data show that nearly half of the respondents (47.53 percent) never access urban government website. On the one hand, government invests numerously in e-government development. On the other hand, government websites cannot penetrate into the large user base. The ironic paradox becomes unprecedentedly challenging in the face of Web 2.0 technologies, as they may be abused for criminal and riot purposes.

### **The Introduction of Microblogging in Government**

Learning and adaptation lies in the heart of authoritarian resilience in China. The reform and opening-up policy package introduced in the late 1970s has incentivized government to learn and adapt to the rapidly changing circumstance. China government likes to learn from the West to reform its Party-state organs and public policies. IT applications without ideological appeals are appreciated by the government, and the loose climate of intellectual property protection facilitates their diffusion.

Some pioneering government agencies in coastal cities initiated the use of microblogging shortly after its release in 2009. Police departments championed the movement, and their short distance and frequent interaction with local residents made the applications soon popular (Ma 2013). As done in the U.S. and Netherlands, microblogging is used by police to inspect criminal cases. The propaganda department of the Communist Party of China (CPC) also recognized the mobilization power of microblogging and used it spontaneously to circulate CPC doctrines. Other agencies

such as tourism administration, transportation, and education also joined the bandwagon of government microblogging.

By March 2011, 1,680 agencies and 720 officials have been opened their official microblog accounts on leading platforms (Zhang and Jia 2011). The figures have soon increased to be 32,358 and 18,203 respectively by the late 2011 (E-Government Research Center 2012), and then they surged to be 113,382 and 63,332 respectively in 2012 (E-Government Research Center 2012). To some extent, microblogging has changed the behavior and style of government in China. For instance, eight in ten of the corruption cases formally inspected in 2012 were exposed by whistle-blowers through microblogging. The CPC Central Disciplinary Committee and Ministry of Supervision, the watchdog in China, also opened their online channels (<http://www.mos.gov.cn/>) in reaction to demystify themselves and to glean clues and accusations of government wrongdoings from the public.

## **The Pitfalls and Challenges of Government 2.0 in China**

The development of Government 2.0 in China faces mountainous challenges. We focus on three of them to identify the pitfalls of microblogging use in public sector in China.

### **Government 1.5**

Similar to the use of Web 2.0 technologies in European countries and the United States, government dominantly uses them for one-way information disclosure rather than two-way interaction between citizens. Although social media applications provide unprecedented opportunities to advance their interactivity with citizens, government is still accustomed to release information rather than engage citizens. The use of social media in government is still in the stage of Government 1.5 at the most (Millard 2010; Reddick and Norris 2013).

### **The trade-off of top-down and bottom-up approaches**

Early initiatives in using microblogging are successful in engaging the public and revamping government image, but latter comers are often forced to adopt and reluctant to interact with citizens. Very different from their proactive peers pioneering in the use of microblogging, these lagging agencies are reactive in adopting and using social media. The emerging of ghost microblogs, in which accounts are registered but seldom updated, has become regular and disappointing phenomena in China. Such practices heavily hurt public confidence and impede Government 2.0 development.

### **The institutionalization of Government 2.0**

Early adopters usually invest extra resource (personnel and technology) to operate microblogs, but are constrained by resource and sustainability. Several provinces (e.g., Guangdong and Xinjiang) introduced regulations to guide government microblogging, but such measures depressed its innovative use. One municipal police bureau in central Shanxi province, for instance, put all its energy to its account in Sina Weibo

and was warmly supported by its followers. Its supervisors at provincial police department, however, monitor Tencent QQ and mandatorily requires its account herein to increase the number of followers by 100 weekly. The use of microblogging has incrementally transformed from informal experiments to formal practices, and it is pivotal to consider how to institutionalize and routinize Government 2.0 (Mergel and Bretschneider 2013).

### **Concluding Remarks: The Prospect of Government 2.0 in China**

The complexities and wicked problems require government to work together with diverse stakeholders including citizens, private sectors, and NGOs to co-create innovative solutions, and the emergence and popularity of Web 2.0 technologies advance the process (Eggers 2007). The motivation-capacity framework can be used to explain the variation of microblogging use across agencies (Mohr 1969; Sahni, Wessel and Christensen 2013). The practices of Government 2.0 in China suggest that motivation rather than capacity is the key of its success (Ma 2014). Without energetically supported from leaders and civil servants, Government 2.0 cannot be realized in China. The further development and institutionalization of Government 2.0, however, requires its transformation from bottom-up emerging to top-down mandate. The traditional development of e-government must also be accelerated to catch up the rapid change of IT landscape. How to balance the two aspects is also a crucial problem in Government 2.0 development, and our analyses identify some key aspects to be addressed. The practices of Government 2.0 in China also generate implications for governments in other contexts, particularly in developing countries and transition economies, to harness new IT for good governance.

*Dr. Liang Ma is a research fellow at Nanyang Centre for Public Administration, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He can be reached at [liangma@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:liangma@ntu.edu.sg).*