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The Wisdom of the Earth

I visited China this spring, exactly 10 years since I first went to start the Auto-ID Center at Fudan University, in Shanghai. A lot has changed, but it's not surprising. Back then, you could sense the nation was getting ready for a period of unprecedented growth. Today, you can see the money as you walk the streets. Downtown Shanghai, once a few small buildings, is crowded with skyscrapers. Macau, the gambling

center, makes three times more money than Las Vegas. In Hong Kong, where the rich Chinese shop, there are lines outside Prada, Gucci and other luxury stores.

While the United States works to overcome the self-inflicted devastation of the 2008 recession and distracts itself with presidential birth certificates and other trivia, China stays focused on economic growth. And RFID is a central part of China's plan. How central? China has, to the best of my knowledge, the only head of state who understands RFID. Premier Wen Jiabao, the principal architect of China's economic growth, has been citing the Internet of Things as an area of strategic growth for China for several years now. In an August 2009 speech, he presented a formula that translates to "Internet + Internet of Things = Wisdom of the Earth." After the birth of computing, and the arrival of the Internet, the Internet of Things—a standardized way for computers to understand the world without human help, using RFID networks and sensors—is the "third wave" of information technology. It will have a huge impact on the 21st century.



China's premier gets this. As a result, his government is investing heavily in RFID, planning to use it in health care and national identification cards, and opening and funding research centers in Hong Kong and other areas.

Yes, some other countries fund RFID initiatives, but I haven't heard of other world leaders talking about RFID with Wen's depth of understanding. Top hits in a Google search for "Obama

RFID,” for example, are YouTube videos about government conspiracies, followed by two articles from *RFID Journal*: a 2008 editorial hoping the new president will see RFID as part of America’s future, and a blog post from April 2011 pointing out a hint of RFID in a White House press release about ID cards.

China’s economy will become larger than the U.S. economy by 2016, according to the International Monetary Fund. The country will use RFID to help fuel that growth, and in doing so, it will have a massive impact on the RFID market. Already, China appears to be developing its own RFID standards, having rejected EPC Gen 2 because it’s burdened with royalty claims—most of them from U.S. companies. Unless things change drastically, China, led by its visionary premier, will consolidate its position as the world’s largest and most advanced RFID user. And since the player with the most leverage sets the rules, the world could soon be saying *ni hao*—hello—to China’s RFID standard, whatever it turns out to be.

Kevin Ashton was cofounder and executive director of the Auto-ID Center.



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