

Un/learning global governances. An introduction to the digital turn in China

[es] Des/aprendiendo las gobernanzas globales: Una introducción al giro digital en China

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1. Introduction

Over recent decades, China has undergone a profound technological revolution, transitioning from being the ‘world’s factory’ to becoming one of its centers of innovation. There is no doubt that China now stands as the largest telecom market globally, playing a pivotal role in shaping digital governance. This transformation represents the most recent facet of the so-called ‘Chinese miracle’, a term used to describe the rapid modernization, industrialization, and infrastructure revolution that has occurred since the late 1970s.

This period of innovation is far from a new phenomenon. Xiao Yuefan (2019) indicates that part of the current ethos of Chinese innovation can be traced back to Mao Zedong’s initiative when he came to power in the 1930s. According to Yuefan (2019), the Great Leap Forward, in a context of confrontation with the legacies of imperialism, Confucianism, and later Marxism and Leninism, sought to promote cultural cohesion and increased innovation through the appropriation of popular grassroots movements, largely setting the course for future transformations. However, it is possible that the ‘Chinese miracle’ was not entirely Chinese but a response to internal Chinese contingencies. China’s internal crisis and the subsequent reforms initiated in the 1970s coincided with the long crisis of global capitalism.

Hence, in terms of its underlying conditions, the start of the ‘Chinese miracle’ coincides with the emergence of neoliberalism in the West. This striking coincidence can in fact be viewed as a series of flexible responses rather than pre-established pathways or

plans, with this interdependence continuing since then. This special issue of *Teknokultura*, focusing on ‘China and the digital turn’, contributes to our understanding of these nuanced perspectives on global interdependencies. It strives to avoid perpetuating simplistic dualities that separate politics from trade, capitalism from post-socialism, and the global North(s) from the South(s).

2. Geopolitical antitheses and synergies

In recent years, the Chinese economy has shown signs of structural cooling, evident in the significant drop in domestic consumption and a deep crisis in the real estate market. Chinese Communist Party leaders, with Xi Jinping at the forefront, acknowledged this situation during a Politburo meeting in July 2023. They recognized «insufficient domestic demand, operational challenges in several companies, multiple risks in critical sectors, and a complex and harsh external environment» (Abril, 2023). However, it would be a misconception to believe that China’s slowdown would benefit the Western world. The Chinese economy benefits both consumers in developed nations and raw material producers in emerging countries. Therefore, as suggested by some analysts like Alejandro Neut (2023), the end of the Chinese economic miracle would likely exacerbate current geopolitical instabilities, potentially pushing us toward a scenario reminiscent of the Cold War. This could lead to domestic economies developing primarily under the force of interventionist tendencies.

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China's ongoing economic slowdown coincides with a recent proposal to expand the BRICS partnership, a political and economic forum originally established in 2001 by Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa as the key emerging economies. During the Summit held in August 2023 in Johannesburg, discussions took place regarding the inclusion, starting from 2024, of Argentina, Egypt, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Ethiopia, forming the new BRICS+ coalition. This intended expansion represents a challenge to the dominance of the U.S. dollar in the global economy and serves as a response to the growing influence of the transatlantic alliance, notably the contentious inclusion of Ukraine as a full member of NATO, along with other countries with a Soviet history, such as Finland.

Moreover, the conflict in Ukraine has offered a glimpse into how geopolitical ambitions, including those of China, have been unfolding on the African continent for some time, alongside investments in ICT infrastructure. The balkanization of a significant portion of Africa might have remained concealed from the majority in the global North were it not for the foiled African expedition of the Wagner Group leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin, and the recent upheaval affecting well-established governments and democracies. All of this takes place against the grim backdrop of widespread famine in the Horn of Africa and Yemen, which are the primary destinations for Ukrainian grain exports.

The interconnectedness of the global economy and politics underscores the significance of understanding how developments in China resonate worldwide. To gain an overview of current geopolitics, it is also essential to acquaint oneself with the work of scholars and researchers in China actively engaged in topics related to the pivotal role of the digital transformation in China. By bringing together some of these scholarly contributions, our goal is to foster a deeper understanding of China's digital transformation and its implications worldwide.

3. Structure and contents

Each article in this issue delves into specific aspects of China's digital transformation and its impact on various facets of society. The articles are organized into two overarching sections. The first, titled 'Digital governance, development, and emerging ethics', encompasses three studies that provide a panoramic view of essential topics related to China's current prominent role in the global economy and its pivotal position in digital governance. The second section, as the title suggests, 'Chinese platform society: Case studies', comprises four in-depth case studies that explore domains and communities within China significantly affected by digitalization or that have emerged alongside it. It's important to note that the

term 'platform society', a concept introduced by José Van Dijck, Thomas Poell and Martijn de Waal (2018), is used here to describe how social and economic dynamics are increasingly influenced by a globalized ecosystem of online platforms.

Inaugurating this issue, Debao Xiang and Weihai Cai provide an illuminating overview of China's commitment to ICT development, a central force driving the 'Chinese miracle' since its inception. Their work, titled 'Information and communication technologies and China's international communication with the world', sheds light on how seemingly contradictory approaches, which may appear irreconcilable from a Western standpoint, find harmonious coexistence in the eyes of our Chinese colleagues and analysts. According to the authors, China's canny use of the free market and engagement in neoliberal globalization, a strategy initiated in the early 1980s, forms an integral part of its broader plan to amplify global power and influence. Their aim? According to Xiang and Cai: «to challenge the previous order and seek alternative solutions, ultimately forging a post-American and post-Western world». Achieving this goal requires the establishment of alternative global communication networks and audiences, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and, accordingly, the development of global digital infrastructure as exemplified by the Digital Silk Road (DSR). From this perspective, seemingly disparate phenomena and processes acquire new layers of meaning, including the multi-purpose nature (convergence of applications) that explains the widespread popularity of Chinese platforms like Tik-Tok, China's leadership in the expansion of the BRICs group, and its support for a global infrastructure development strategy aimed at enhancing networks in emerging economies, notably in Africa over the past decade.

In their contribution, Lucía Benítez-Eyzaguirre and Angel Gordo—the only non-Chinese contributors in this issue—conduct an in-depth analysis of the business model of China's major tech giants, often referred to as BAT (Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent). These tech giants emerged during the preceding decade and have exerted a significant influence on Western tech giants known as the Big Five or GAFAM (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft). Inspired by the 'shanzhai' phenomenon, also known as 'Chinese copy' or 'China fake', the authors argue that both the Chinese tech conglomerates and their Western counterparts share common traits. These include market dominance, the strategic maximization of metadata extractive value, and the formidable capability to surveil, regulate, and govern not only individual users but entire populations. This paper challenges us to transcend simplistic narratives and embrace a more nuanced understanding of technological evolution in China. It cautions against overly simplified postcolonial interpretations that propose the coexistence of two ostensibly antagonistic

economic systems—communism and capitalism. Such interpretations, ironically, sometimes adopt a somewhat glamorous deconstructionist lens, as exemplified by thinkers like Han (2017).

Jialin Lin and Changfeng Chen explore the domain of algorithmic risk and ethics within the context of ‘intelligent communication’. This term encompasses the seamless integration of cutting-edge technologies like artificial intelligence (AI), big data, the Internet of things, and robotics to optimize communication efficiency across individuals, organizations, and devices. Through a series of case studies involving prominent international IT companies, as the title indicates ‘The epistemic ethical concerns of algorithms in the field of intelligent communication’, the authors identify specific risks and challenges stemming from the ongoing development of algorithms. Their work highlights the intriguing paradox whereby, as algorithms become more sophisticated, they also lead to greater levels of uncertainty. Furthermore, the authors point out that the instrumental rationality characterizing algorithmic models, while able to maximize benefits, «is not directly accompanied by the maximization of justice».

The works featured in the second part of this issue, titled ‘Chinese platform society: Case studies’, serve as a vivid illustration of how contemporary China epitomizes the concept of a platform society. Inspired by prior notions such as ‘politics of platform’ (Gillespie, 2010) and ‘platform capitalism’ (Srnicsek, 2017), the term the ‘platform society’ does not indicate a new kind of virtual public space that is separate from the actual world we live in. On the contrary, the platform society is situated at the heart of our economies, politics and everyday practices (Van Dijck, Poell & de Waal, 2018).

Platformization is an ongoing process rather than a fixed condition or state, and it involves a diverse range of actors and agencies. In their work titled ‘From hand-held radio to ride-hailing platform: Research on a local technical network of taxi drivers in China’, Wenjie Zhang, Wanxin Tang, Tiantian Yu and Hongzhe Wang shed light on these various agents, with a particular focus on grassroots communities engaged in alternative ways of organizing beyond simply platformization. This study delves into how taxi driver communities in fourth- and fifth-tier cities rely on traditional technological solutions, such as on-call radio platforms. Thanks to grassroots communication networks and ‘low technologies’, taxi drivers in these cities have managed to resist being assimilated by the expanding ride-hailing platforms. According to the authors, these alternative collective practices bear some resemblance to Thomas Piketty’s concept of ‘participatory socialism’. However, they also note that Piketty’s notion, which emerged from the historical context of the Western world, doesn’t fully apply to Chinese society, where «interpersonal relations within groups [...] is generally much stronger than in Western countries».

Minghua Xu and Boyi Deng explore the case of Chinese fansub groups. These are communities of dedicated admirers of US television dramas that voluntarily create domestic subtitles for foreign-language films. Contrary to prevailing Western critiques of digital labor, the authors argue that fansub groups do not conform to the typical digital labor model. As the authors argue, to truly understand their dynamics, «it is important to interpret the fansub culture in the Chinese context». Drawing on three years of digital ethnography involving covert participant observation within a fansub community, Xu and Deng highlight that the fansub business model combines voluntary labor with aspects of commercial profit. Despite not receiving monetary compensation, «group members self-organize and self-manage subtitle production without remuneration and gain personal satisfaction from interpersonal and network interactions». The authors also highlight that the prevailing image of fansubbers held by copyright owners, government officials, and media capitalists in the West as «hidden outlaws, thieves of the digital flow, and unsung heroes», resonates with other representations concurrently present in the contemporary Western discourse, including the ‘threat of China’ and the narrative of the ‘Chinese miracle’.

Platformization, as defined by Nieborg and Poell (2018, par. 4, emphasis in the original), refers to «the penetration of *economic, governmental, and infrastructural extensions* of digital platforms into the web and app ecosystems, fundamentally affecting the operations of the cultural industries». In their work titled ‘Governance by platforms: Configuration of the relationship between party-government and society in China’, Shen and Zhang analyze four typical Chinese platforms and the ways they «allow citizens to express their concerns and demands, promoting governmental transparency, accountability, and efficiency». The authors refer to this process as ‘integrated governance’, which involves providing «additional infrastructure for governance and serves as a channel for Party dominance, government transformation, and the growing influence of society, with the modernization of Chinese governance». However, this attempt at modernization, built upon an extensive process of social platformization, differs from Western governance and its models of participation and leadership. As the authors point out, «In China, it is believed that ‘the political party creates the state, and the state creates society’, while in the West, it is ‘society [that] creates the state, [while] the state creates the political party».

In their article ‘Struggle of adjusting to motherhood through online community participation by ‘green-hand mothers’ in China’, Runxi Zeng and Hua Zhou focus on the challenges and changes undergone in the realm of subjectivities shaped by platformization in Chinese society. Specifically, they explore the influence of WeChat groups on the adaptation of

‘green-hand mothers’ (new mothers). Through digital ethnography and in-depth interviews, the authors analyze the motivations behind first-time mothers’ active participation in these online communities to seek support and information. This paper sheds light on the practices and resources that help maintain these groups’ cohesion and reinforce the members’ collective identity. Zeng and Zhou highlight the way these communities, through ongoing exchanges of opinion and information, guide mothers toward prevailing societal values and «ultimately coming closer to the ideal mother image».

Finally, we would like to mention that Western research on technology in China has often focused on understanding and describing its local specificities, with the aim of making recommendations and adjustments for competitive advantages. Instead of exoticizing or employing another postcolonial perspective, we see this collective editorial effort as an opportunity for Western scholars to both learn and unlearn the complexities and ambivalences that characterize the platformization processes in the Global North. We hope that the papers included in this issue of *Teknokultura* may inspire further

research and dialogue regarding the transformative effects of the digital age in China and its aspirations for an alternative form of globalization.

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