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Platforms and Cultural Production

Platform capitalisms and platform cultures

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Abstract
This article argues for a pluralization of the "platform capitalism" framework, suggesting we should think instead in terms of "platform capitalisms." This pluralization opens the way to a better account of how platforms work in different geocultural contexts, with our focus being on China, India and Japan. The article first outlines several roles the state has taken on in mediating platform capitalisms. We then signal three main axes around which to consider the implications of platform capitalisms for cultural production: state–platform symbiosis; platform precarity; and the informal–formal relation in cultural production. This short provocation, we hope, will help foreground the crucial role of the state in platform capitalisms, such that the state–culture–capitalism nexus might be better acknowledged in research on platforms and cultural production now and into the future. This is particularly important as states themselves increasingly become platform operators.

Keywords
states and platforms, Asian cultural studies, China, India, Japan, platforms and cultural production, platform capitalisms

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Globalization debates in the 1980s and 1990s were defined by the axis of standardization versus differentiation, or sameness and difference (Jameson, 1998). Platform scholars have likewise highlighted that there are "vital differences and surprising correspondences in how platformization takes place" (Poell et al., 2022: 15), particularly when thinking platformization and the global together. This short article will emphasize these "vital differences" and plurality inherent to platformization. We argue that pluralizing the term "platform capitalism" (Srnicek, 2017) to *platform capitalisms* is a crucial analytic step to considering the heterogeneous modes of platformization in a global context. Capitalism, as an analytic, should be centered in discussions of the platformization of cultural production as it calls attention to the power relations and different modes of extraction inherent to this process. That said, capitalism works through differences and tapestries more than sameness (Tsing, 2009), a crucial analytic shift to grasping platformization in its plurality.

In suggesting the need to grapple with *platform capitalisms*, we draw on our work on media power and capitalism in the Asian context, focusing this time on the relation between nations and markets in cultural production, rather than the meso-level of corporations (Mukherjee, 2019; Steinberg et al., 2022; Zhang, 2020, 2023; Zhang and Chen, 2022). In particular we elaborate our (Steinberg et al., 2022) tentative proposition that we should consider platform capitalism in the plural form, to draw out both theoretical models and practical consequences for this pluralization. We also build on like-minded work that both (1) interrogates how platform capitalisms operate in practice and (2) emphasizes the need to decenter "the West" in discussions of platformization (Athique, 2019; Cirolia et al., 2023; Davis and Xiao, 2021; Grohmann and Qiu, 2020). This pluralization allows us to see the ways what we can broadly call *states* and *cultures* impact the markets, corporate forms, and institutional organizations that make up capitalisms. Given the short nature of this intervention, we treat culture in both its expanded sense as habits ingrained within everyday life *and* the narrower sense of culture as a set of cultural products produced for the market (*cultural production*). Our aim is to give a fuller account of actually existing platform capitalisms; a necessary condition for worker struggles – from platform-dependent cultural producers to film workers in streaming platform-oriented "supply chain cinema" (Dickinson, 2021) to platform-reliant gig workers – as well as for critical media analysis.

This focus on the interactions between states, markets and cultures in platform capitalisms recalibrates some of the useful frameworks Poell et al. (2022) introduce – their "markets" section in particular – to account for (1) different state–market relations in distinct contexts; and (2) extra-market relations within these contexts. Markets are shaped and conditioned by the state (Harvey, 2005). This means that not only do we need to use the theory of multisided markets as developed by economists to analyze platform businesses; we must also trace the history, geography, and media-technological conditions of the introduction of this theory (Steinberg, 2019) and recognize how markets operate in "market-in-state" relationships (Zhang, 2023; Zheng and Huang, 2018). Rather than bracket the state or only treat it in relation to the freedom or censorship of cultural producers, we should see how states shape the way markets work, and how this conditions cultural production. The state is not seen as an externality but a productive agent within a multisided market – operating at different social and geographical scales.

We view the pluralization of *platform capitalisms* as key to the epistemological shift needed to grasp the multiple effects of platformization on global cultural production. Platform capitalism is hence more akin to *actually existing platform capitalisms*; a twist on the productive frame of "actually existing platformization" (van Doorn et al., 2021). Theories of capitalism abstracted from Euro-American experiences too often treat the state as the mere guarantor of private capital (with private capital and free labor considered the two principal conditions of capitalism). And yet in what follows we show the crucial relationship of the state within the market and within platforms. Our focus is on Asia, drawing out what Kuan-hsing Chen (Chen, 2010) would term the inter-Asian references across instances of platform capitalism and its national contexts; including how nations adopt strategies learned from each other.

Yet to treat Asia as an exception would be a mistake. The relationship between states and platform capitalism that we describe are not isolated to the Asian context, but are present in Turkey (Ergin Bulut, in this special issue), Saudi Arabia (Khalil and Zayani, 2021) and Kenya (Cirolia et al., 2023) – to mention just three of many other concordant contexts. In this regard a more robust set of "inter" relations inside and outside Asia could be argued for; this would also trouble some of the South–North divides in thinking about the state–market–culture relationship. The state is an increasingly visible actor today; we write at a time of renewed attention to industrial policy within even formerly neoliberal states, with the caveat that even neoliberal states have always required "large and expanding range of forms of governmental intervention" (Massumi, 2015: 3).

To substantiate the claim that considering state–capital relations in relation to platforms is essential, we briefly examine three case studies from three national contexts: India's Reliance, Japan's Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI; now METI), and China's Alibaba. We then note some practical consequences in thinking platform capitalisms in the plural form for the analysis of cultural production.

Platform capitalisms in theory

In his 2017 book *Platform Capitalism*, political economist Nick Srnicek offers a crucial account of the increasing dominance of digital platforms as business models and monopolistic firms centered on extracting and controlling immense amounts of data. The capitalist history and conjunctural shifts that he maps out, however, largely center on the transatlantic experiences of Silicon Valley–Wall Street–London, and largely sidestep the position of the state. While we remain indebted to this initial mapping and other work on the topic (Liang et al., 2022), as well as research on the "platform economy" (Kenney and Zysman, 2016), surveillance capitalism, and digital racial capitalism (McMillan Cottom, 2020) we point to several accounts of capitalisms that suggest nuanced ways to understand the position of the state in relation to the market.

Chalmers Johnson (1982) offers one such approach in a book on Japan's years of postwar economic growth known as the "economic miracle." Johnson focused on the ways state ministries and MITI in particular controlled the direction private enterprise took, guiding industrial policy and playing the role of "pilot agency" of Japan.

Johnson terms this a “plan-rational economy” as distinct both from a US-style “market economy” and “plan ideological” economies “of the Soviet type” (Johnson, 1982: 16). In addition to undercutting reductive culturalist explanations of Japan’s economic miracle, Johnson introduces a *comparative capitalisms perspective* that serves as a key reference point for subsequent debates around “varieties of capitalism,” the developmental state, and “Asian capitalism” (Hundt and Uttam, 2017). While these approaches have their own shortcomings, notably a reliance on of their own form culturalism (“Confucian capitalism”) or a normative model of European social democracy (Zhang and Peck, 2016), they helpfully center the state in thinking about the localizations of capitalism(s).

This emphasis on the state as an economic player is echoed by Zheng and Huang (2018) in the Chinese context. Conceptualizing a distinct Chinese economic tradition of “market in the state” (as opposed to the liberal capitalist view of the market economy wherein the state is subsumed to the market), they divide the Chinese market into a three-layered hierarchy: the grassroots (petty capitalism and rural marketplace), the national (state monopolies), and the middle (where state agents and private actors interact). Focusing on the changing modes of state domination over the market in different historical periods, they trace the mutual transformation of the state and market in China over time, situating Chinese internet giants as a uniquely powerful type of middle-ground private business whose size, significance, and autonomy present challenges to state domination (Zheng and Huang, 2018: 319).

Athique and Kumar (2022) offer a further triadic qualification of the market economy in their account of platform megacorporations and the Indian state. The first level is the marketplace “where buyers and sellers engage in the negotiation of price for both products and labour”; the second is the meso level of media companies where there is “robust competition between firms and products” (Athique and Kumar, 2022: 8). At the third level, “meta-level” or apex firms like Reliance may buy and sell media interests at the meso level; but they no longer operate within the realm of free markets. Rather, they are platform megacorps above the market who are barons to others below them, but are themselves vassals to a state (a sovereign above the apex level) whose whims may change, and thus must be centered in analysis.

Platform capitalisms in practice

In this section we turn to several practical consequences of foregrounding state–market–culture relations in the Asian context and beyond. We signal some effects these different modes of platform capitalism have on cultural production when we take the state as a key player in platformization. We choose the following issues, sites and practices insofar as they show how state intervention cuts across multiple levels, from apex megacorps to platform-based cultural workers to end-users.

State–platform symbiosis

The state is central to the emergence and shape of platform capitalisms across Asia. The rise of the platform economy in Japan results in part from the pioneering i-mode mobile internet service, itself a product of Japan’s plan-rational economy. NTT Docomo’s i-mode mobile internet project was one of the first multisided markets that formed the basis, in the late 1990s, for platform-based cultural production of the next decades (Steinberg, 2019). NTT's status as a household name and former national telecommunications monopoly afforded it the trust of institutions, cultural producers, and users willing to create new services and pay online via a trusted intermediary – NTT Docomo. i-mode was successful due to its proximity to the trusted state at the tail-end of the plan-rational economy.

This symbiotic if also dynamically changing relationship between monopoly technology companies and governments also characterizes Chinese platform giants. In comparison to central state and governmental institutions, local states in China are often more pro-business because local officials in different regions compete with each other both bureaucratically and in market terms (measured by GDP growth and jobs created). E-commerce company Alibaba, for example, rides on this "dual market" of market and bureaucratic competition at the local level to garner political support from politicians and institutions (Zhou, 2019). During fieldwork research on the "e-commerce village" phenomenon in China, Zhang (2023) came to see how village, county, municipal and even provincial leaders competed for the Alibaba-recognized title of "Taobao Villages" and the associated support offered by Alibaba for their jurisdictions, just as they vied for foreign investment before the late 2000s. Cognizant of this political economic logic inherent to central–local state relations in China, Alibaba invested heavily in drumming up the national Taobao Village phenomenon, mobilizing the dual market to their advantage.

Platform precarity and apex-level actors

Focusing on the state also complicates the locus of platform precarity. Literature on the consequences of platformization on cultural production often addresses its effects on two levels:

1. The effects of platforms on larger-scale cultural producers
2. The effects that changes to business models or algorithms made by large-scale platforms have on the smaller-scale entrepreneurs of cultural production

Given the role of the state or state agencies in this plurality of capitalisms we identify a third form of precarity:

3. The precarity of platform megacorporations in relation to the state. The platform megacorp may be a baron, but it is also a vassal to the state. Though predominantly a signal of vulnerable labourers, we expand precarity to include the platform operators themselves, since they are subject to the whims of the state. The interactions between platforms and labourers, we argue, are sometimes mediated by the state with mixed and often unintended consequences for platform labourers.

Reliance's position as a vassal means its power may be reined in or mobilized, at the whim of the state. While few may sympathize with Alibaba being reined in by the Chinese state or its agencies, or TikTok being banned from India, this corporate precarity has consequences for the entire industry of cultural producers who rely on these platforms for their livelihood. The Chinese state's re-regulation campaign (2019–22), targeting digital platforms like Alibaba, was not intended to hurt sellers on the platform; yet some small and medium-sized sellers were indirectly impacted. Alibaba's decline in revenue led the company to lay off employees and reduce costs, compromising its ability to improve the service for its sellers while also squeezing more profits out of them. This involvement of the state in sometimes unclear ways is also the source of geopolitical contestations (Rolf and Schindler, 2023).

The formal–informal axis and cultural production

A further consequence of emphasizing the state–market–culture trichotomy is to reconfigure the formal–informal relationship, with state visibility as marker of the formal. The platformization of "vernacular creativity" via YouTube channels and short video platforms in cultural production has led to greater formalization of the economy, but we should also focus on the state's role in formalization through its participation in the platform economy (Athique and Parthasarathi, 2020; Burgess, 2006). For some the informal is also a way of pluralizing capitalism; a way to differentiate postcolonial capitalism from Euro-American capitalisms (Samāddāra, 2018). Yet the informal–formal relation is far more complicated than either capitalist or not; we must instead analyze informality as dynamic and relational within platform capitalisms without fetishizing North–South differences. The specific ways national or regional economies become integrated into platform capitalism sometimes perpetuate forms of informality associated with "Southern" labor practices and at other times destabilize the very dichotomy of informal versus formal labor.

One consequence of this destabilization of informal/formal is the need to rethink who counts as *cultural producers* in platform capitalism. One key example of the complex intersection of formal/informal and cultural production under conditions of platformization is found in rural China, where e-commerce is grafted onto familial businesses in the handicraft industry and the gendered labor of handicraft production (Zhang, 2023). Handicraft production itself is a form of cultural production not frequently recognized as such (Close and Wang, 2020; see also Tommy Tse in this special issue). Here platform production involves not only *platform-based* entrepreneurial workers of e-commerce shop owners and their employees (often relatives or fellow villagers) but also the *platform-mediated* work of logistics, raw materials processing, and handicraft production. This persistence, even revitalization of informal, family-based division of labor is conditioned by the specific manner in which rural Chinese workers have been incorporated into platform capitalism; the culturalist tradition of familism; as well as state-led efforts to encourage mass entrepreneurship.

Finally, through its active role in the digital formalization of the economy, the Indian state inserts itself as an agent in platforms' multisided markets. The Indian state participates in creating the "India Stack," which is based on the unique identification number connected to a citizen's bank account and connected to their mobile phone. This allows for interoperability, authentication, and digital lending. The India Stack sees both formalization and the intermediation of the state in multisided markets, developing a form of "digital id capitalism" (Hicks, 2020). With the blurring of the distinction between platform and infrastructure, platforms themselves are increasingly seen as the purview of the state.

Conclusion

We have argued that some frameworks of platform analysis must be reconfigured to account for the plurality of platform capitalisms and the effects of the triadic culture–state–capital relationship on both platformization and cultural production. We then sketched three consequences of considering the state as crucial to pluralizing platform capitalisms and its impacts on cultural production. Platform-dependent cultural producers live the pluralities of platforms in real time; we see the pluralization of platform capitalisms as the theoretical corrective that acknowledges these lived realities and allows those involved in contra-platform struggles to target and engage the state alongside platforms as crucial sites of struggles. At this conjunctural moment, when states increasingly see platforms as falling under their purview, foregrounding this state–platform relationship seems to us crucial. States occupy not only a regulatory position but also a constitutive one wherein *states as platforms* deliver services to citizens. State interventionism and industrial policies are on the rise worldwide and states will only play larger roles in platforms in years to come. Finally, the state itself is not a monolith, surfacing at different locations and regional interfaces in various forms and to varying effects – something we could only gesture towards here.

Of course, there are reasons to be wary of potential abuses of this pluralization, namely the subsumption of critique to nationalist projects, much as calls for the decolonization of data or platforms have been appropriated by nationalist governments in the service, for instance, of building the India Stack, or aiding the global expansion of Chinese platform corporations. We hope, though, that this platform capitalisms framework opens the door to more granular, attentive, and theory-building analyses of platforms and their effects on cultural production – including within such explicitly nationalist projects. This complements existing scholarship and tools of analysis that downplay the productive (albeit not always positive) role of the state in mediating platforms, capitalism, and cultural production. Platforms and the cultural production that occurs inside and alongside them are crucially informed by existing state–market relations, practices and forms of organization. The theories we use to account for them must reflect this diversity, this tapestry of actually existing platform capitalisms.

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