

# From Platform Capitalism to Digital China: The Path, Governance, and Geopolitics

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## Abstract

The “platform turn” across various disciplines has introduced a new framework for analyzing the global digital economy. This special issue critically engages with existing discussions by adopting a broad political-economic perspective on the platform economy in China. Aiming to deconstruct and contextualize the dominant concepts of “platformization” and “infrastructuralization,” we focus on three central themes under the overarching framework of *Digital China*: “Platform cum Infrastructure along a Techno-developmental Path,” “Platform Governance,” and “Platform Spatiality and Geopolitics.” These themes collectively deepen our understanding of the temporal and spatial dynamics of platforms, as well as their conceptual significance as evolving processes and outcomes. More importantly, we highlight how the development of Chinese platforms reflects not only the contours of China’s contested integration into global capitalism but also the state’s shifting socio-economic priorities and its broader aspiration to establish a distinct “Chinese model of modernization.”

## Keywords

China, platform economy, digital economy, platformization, infrastructuralization

For many, the rise of Chinese platform companies in the recent decades are a clear sign of China’s tight integration into global capitalism. Chinese companies such as Alibaba, Tencent, and ByteDance are often spotlighted together with their Silicon Valley counterparts such as Amazon, Google, and Facebook as the poster-children signifying a new era of platform capitalism. Equipped with a new set of techno-economic apparatuses such as datafication and algorithmics to enable economies of scale, digital platforms have both inherited and extended the neoliberal regimes of labor, capital, and privatization with disruptive social consequences, leading to “platform societies” across the world (Piletić, 2024; Srnicek, 2016; van Dijck et al., 2018).

Yet, the alignment of China’s digital economy with platform capitalism seems expedient and ephemeral in the country’s political economic environment. In the most recent wave of regulatory actions, the state vowed to end the unchecked “barbaric” growth of platforms to prevent the “disorderly expansion of capital” (Xinhuanet.com, 2021). Starting with the abrupt halting of the mega IPO of Ant Group, a spin-off of Alibaba’s financial arm, and a probe into the parent company’s alleged antitrust violations in late 2020, Chinese authorities disciplined and fined sores of the country’s major platform companies during the following three years, targeting an array of malpractices ranging from monopolistic activities, unfair competition, financial risks,

data security breaches, labor rights violations, to detrimental effects on Children (L. Zhang, 2023b).

Labeled by the mainstream media as “the Big Tech Crackdown,” the events provoked numerous interpretations and speculations about the future of China’s platform economy. Some see it as an abrupt turn from the government’s earlier laissez-faire approach toward its domestic internet sector and deems it “self-defeating” amid the heightened Sino-US tech rivalry and an on-going global pandemic (Bloomberg, 2021; *The Economist*, 2021). Others argue that the drastic events overshadowed the long trajectory of China’s developing regulatory scheme to promote the “healthy and sustainable development” of its fast-growing digital economy (Creemers, 2023). Some take it as a sign that the state aims at total societal compliance by reigning in its platform companies in multiple social realms (*New York Times*, 2021). Others view it as a state-led Polanyian movement to shield society from the relentless forces of the market (Li, 2022) or as a “new governance paradigm” signaling a shift from

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prioritizing growth to emphasizing fairness and sustainability, following a decade-long effort to eradicate absolute poverty (Morgan Stanley, 2023).

Speculations and uncertainties around China's platform economy eventually were absorbed into the urgency of the post-pandemic economic recovery. In a new "Digital China" policy framework in 2023, in tandem with a series of recent macro-economic plans such as 14th Five Year Plan for Digital Economy Development in 2021, the Chinese state reiterated the importance of digital economy. Extending earlier policy initiatives such as "internet+" and "Made in China 2025," Digital China continues to call for expanding the digital economy beyond its narrow focus on internet-based consumption and services to a broader, innovation-driven agenda of comprehensive "digital transformations" across key industries.

While a digital sector revolving around cutting-edge digital technologies—such as 5G, the internet of Things (IoT), artificial intelligence (AI), and cloud computing—is considered the core of the digital economy, it remains a relatively small part of the economy. Aligned with China's long-standing economic model of industrial and infrastructure upgrading, Digital China highlights the role of this sector to become "a new type of infrastructures 新基建" and "new productivity boosters 新质生产力" for both traditional and "emerging strategic" industries essential to the overall economy (Naughton et al., 2024; State Council, 2023). According to China Academy of Information and Communications Technology (CAICT), the share of the digital economy in China's total GDP reached 41.5% in 2022, up from 26.1% in 2014. The digital upgrading of the traditional industries has taken up 81.7% of China's total digital economic outputs (CAICT, 2023, p. 10). In this light, China's digital economy is anchored on the integration between technology and industry as well as on balance between industrial components that prioritize value creation by upgrading productive capabilities and the increasingly financialized digital tech sector focusing on extracting value for financial interests.

Digital China, as another signpost in the continual path of China's tech-driven economic re-structuring and growth, highlights the set of structural conditions, broad economic goals, as well as associated future imaginaries that problematize the application of the epistemological framework of platform capitalism to the Chinese context. While the development of Chinese platform companies has reflected the contour of China's contested integration with the global capitalism, their "platformization" and "infrastructuralization," as numerous empirical studies have already shown (Shen, 2022; L. Zhang, 2023a; L. Zhang & Chen, 2022), have taken place in close relation to the state's evolving socio-economic goals and its long-term pursuit of a "Chinese model of modernization" (State Council, 2023).

## What's in the Name

The platform effects in a diverse yet distinct set of techno-economic forms and functions. It has been examined as a

modular technological architecture for industry innovation, a multi-sided competitive market comprising interactive participants (Gawer, 2014), a distinct organizational structure that leverages algorithms to co-op assets, resources, and activities of "complementors" through algorithms (Stark & Pais, 2020, p. 47), a new business model that harnesses and manages vast amounts of data to fuel growth (Srnicsek, 2016), and a network mediating economic circulation and transaction, in "interlocking domains of commerce, technology, sociability and logistics" (Athique & Parthasarathi, 2020, p. 1; Langley & Leyshon, 2017).

While the platform economy, as a sum of the effects of all platform functions, has led to disruptive social consequences, its constitutive regimes of labor, finance, and technology have taken shape in the long post-war transition to a post-industrial economy and neoliberal globalization, and particularly in the post-2008 capitalist cycle of boom and bust (Piletić, 2024; Srnicsek, 2016). The inception of the platform was premised on the global liberalization of capital flows, the domination of highly financialized economic models, the formation of globalized value chains to reduce costs and extract profits from developing markets; and the conquest of the ICT sector as the new frontier of capital accumulation to overcome the declining rate of profit (Dumenil & Levy, 2004; Jia & Winseck, 2018).

In this light, the development of Chinese platform companies was a result of what many considered China's neoliberal turn toward its full integration into the global market. The state-led reforms toward marketization and capitalization in the telecommunication sector in the 1990s fueled the construction boom of the telecom infrastructures, from the mobile internet to 4G broadband, which set the stage for the rise of a commercial internet led by private tech companies offering "over-the-top (OTT)" services in China in 2000s.

Indeed, China's internet sector, from the first-generation "big three portals," Sina, Sohu, and Netease, to the new-generation BAT, or Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent, have been intimately tied to a global network of private capital (Jia & Winseck, 2018; J. Zhang, 2016, p. 101). The platforms' "growth-before-profit" and "expansion-through-acquisition" growth models bankrolled by financial capital is a sign of the heightened level of financialization in China's platform economy—where finance dominates both as a means and an end.

However, the neoliberal growth regimes of the platform economy—platformization, infrastructuralization, and above all, privatization and financialization—have been conditioned by China's local political economic contexts. The continued, albeit relaxed, state control over factor markets—including land, labor, finance, critical infrastructure, and data resources—has established significant entry barriers in China's quasi-liberalized telecommunications and related ICT markets, which have been regarded as the new frontiers for global capital. To bypass government caps on ownership in the telecom sector, for instance, overseas capital has to rely on special arrangements such as Variable Interest Entity (VIE) structures established through subsidiary holding

firms in third countries to access China's vast ICT markets (Rolf & Schindler, 2023). As Jia's commentary in this special issue demonstrates, the genesis and implications of VIEs have showcased how the seemingly universal platforms are in fact the result of their spatial practices to adapt to China's local contexts for access to global financial capital (see also L. Li, 2024).

More importantly, the state's stance toward the platformization of Chinese tech companies has been premised on the expectations of their infrastructural potentials for the state-led projects of economic restructuring. The 2008 global financial crisis prompted the state to accelerate its effort to steer China's struggling labor-intensive export-oriented economy. Policymakers put the emerging internet industry, with the related hardware, network, and services sectors, in the driving seat for developing a tech-driven consumer economy (Yuan & Zhang, 2024). Similarly, Digital China highlights the urgency of the post-pandemic restructuring of China's existing property-centered debt-fueled growth model, which has experienced significant slowdown in the changing geopolitical economic environment. Digital China renews calls for cutting-edge tech innovations to boost industrial productivity, which go beyond technology application in downstream sectors to include critical high-tech inputs in upstream sectors such as 5G, chips (integrated circuits), cloud computing, and AI (Naughton, 2021). At same time, it aims to steer the economy away from platforms that are "big in size" as a result of capital expansion but "not strong in innovation" and unmoored from the real economy of industrial production (Huang, 2023).

Digital China, as a recent signpost along the historical trajectory of China's tech-driven development, serves as a point of departure for unpacking the platform as an assemblage of techno-economic practices defined by the neoliberal capitalist growth regime. It also provides an opportunity to re-articulate these forms and practices to the contours of China's developmental path. As part of emergent counter-narratives to standard accounts of platforms (Athique & Parthasarathi, 2020; Steinberg, 2022; L. Zhang, 2021), Digital China anchors our analytical efforts on the following three themes of this special issue, namely, "Platform cum Infrastructure along a Techno-developmental Path," "Platform Governance," and "Platform Spatiality and Geopolitics." Together they aim to enrich our understanding of the temporal, spatial configurations, and even very conception of platform as processes and consequences (see Steinberg in the Digital Asia special issue).

### **Platform cum Infrastructure Along a Techno-Developmental Path**

Historically, the "infrastructuralization" of platforms has paralleled the gradual "platformization" of infrastructures in advanced capitalist societies. During the process, traditional infrastructures—once public goods provided or regulated by governments—have transformed into a neoliberal

"platformized" model (Plantin et al., 2018). In this model, infrastructures are privatized as assets for maximizing profits in global capital markets. The history of networked computing resources is a telling example—the core of the contemporary online infrastructure is completely privatized in the Global North (van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 15).

In contrast to the path from the fully privatized telecommunication industries to increasingly platformized internet service industries in the advanced capitalist countries, state infrastructural provision, from the Golden Projects in early years to the most recent 5G network, has been the condition for the development of the internet service industry in China. Moreover, the state has tried to manage, or at least partially steer, the evolving market-driven platform economy to achieve its developmental goals and enable its economic restructuring processes. Digital China's focus on linking the digital tech sector to the transformation of the real economy is a recent example.

While acknowledging the role of the Market in nurturing new tech and business innovations, the state emphasizes that the value of private platform companies come from their architectural role—establishing arrangements that enable the functioning of the specific markets these companies initiate and occupy, such as the e-commerce and digital payment markets, to achieve the state's developmental goals. To achieve these goals, the state must collaborate with the market in regulating the supply–demand relations, allocating resources, and directing highly dynamic techno-economic activities (Yeh et al., 2015, p. 2826). Consequently, any predictions from a state-centered perspective need to account for variations across different industrial conditions and local institutional environments as well as the evolving dynamics over time (Nee & Cao, 1999; Shi & Ye, 2021).

In this special issue, Meng's article on the development of the big data industry in Guizhou, an economically underdeveloped province in southwest China, is set against this backdrop. While an effort to promote the big data industry for economic growth, Guizhou Cloud Big Data (GCBD), the first provincial-level data sharing platform in China, was started as an infrastructure to coordinate data resources for better governance instead of simply maximizing profit. Meng's field observations show that the state-owned GCBD as a dominant player in the emerging local big data market both attracted and frustrated local tech entrepreneurial activities.

Furthermore, Meng situates the current local state-led developmental model within a multi-layered historical and geographical context—an interplay of post-socialist political legacies, institutional path-dependency, and contemporary techno-economic developmentalism. Drawing on local geo-economic and industrial history, Meng's account of GCBD provides an informative case for understanding the "ambiguities and contradictions" involved in reconciling "the residual socialist commitments of the party-state and its recalibration within the global capitalist context in the past few decades" (Meng, this issue).

Similarly, Yuan and Zhao's article sheds light on "platformization" in China's increasingly data-driven urban governance. As outlined in *Digital China* (CAICT, 2023), digital governance is a key component of the state's efforts to enhance its "soft infrastructures," including financial models and governance frameworks (Rao, 2023). In line with the state's emphasis on data as both a resource and a tool for economic growth, local governments—as the dual agents of the political system and local economic development—have increasingly depended on centralized data platforms for urban governance, which are often co-produced by local municipal authorities, tech companies, and other non-state actors.

In capitalist democracies, however, Government as a Platform (GaaS) typically emphasizes on distributed governance arrangements where the platform's value is co-created by diverse groups of participating stakeholders. Moreover, GaaP initiatives often ended up with digitizing services and information while leaving existing organizational structures and public service processes largely unchanged (Brown et al., 2017). In contrast, Yuan and Zhao show that the construction of the platform as a centralized data management infrastructure aims to dismantle existing bureaucratic divisions and barriers to data sharing. In this context, platformization represents the newest stage of digital governance, emerging within the broad framework of China's decades-long administrative and bureaucratic reforms. These reforms have sought to address structural challenges in its vast multi-layered system amid the country's prolonged processes of decentralization, marketization, and globalization since the late 1970s. Rather than leading to "platformization" or "infrastructuralization"—privatization by and domination of private platforms in public domains, GaaS in urban governance renews the structural tension between centralization and localism through digital data flows; opens up the field of governance to market actors without forfeiting the power of the government; and entails arrangements to mitigate ongoing frictions between the state, local agents, and platforms in the domain of digital governance.

## Platform Governance

China's platform economy has taken shape in the state's continuous adaptation to the global capitalist system through adjusting domestic bureaucratic and legal institutions for the dual purpose of economic growth and restructuring (Hong, 2017). In its managed integration with global platform capitalism, the state power has been reconfigured by emergent new forces alongside increasingly diversified and fragmented interests, technological dependence, and institutional path dependency. The confluence of these and other factors poses challenges to the state's capacity to control the processes and outcomes of the country's political economy.

China's thriving internet service sector has fostered the world's largest online population, with 1.09 billion users,

positioning the country as a global leader in areas such as e-commerce, digital payments, and gaming. Over the past decade, however, "platformization" has profoundly reshaped Chinese society by permeating and commodifying nearly every profitable aspect of social life (J. Li, 2022). Like "platform societies" elsewhere, Chinese society faces growing challenges related to market competition, information order, privacy, social inequality and stability, data security, and such. Given differences in political economies and positions within global techno-economic value chains, countries adopt varying approaches to platform governance (Bradford, 2023). However, as Gorwa (2019, p. 1) argues, "governance is less a set of practices than a capacity." Rather than existing outside the platform ecosystem, a society's ability to build effective institutions for maintaining order often co-evolves with its developing platform economy.

During the 2020–2023 law enforcement campaign, the Chinese government issued a series of laws and regulations, including Data Security Law and Personal Information Protection Law in 2021. While these measures have demonstrated the Chinese state's strong will and the significant power to address social issues and direct the economy toward its goals, the effects of such campaign-style "rectifications" of specific sectors remain debatable. Authorities have increasingly recognized that fostering a healthy digital economy requires an institutionalized governance framework with stable policy expectations and clearly defined boundaries (Huang, 2023).

Indeed, platform governance extends beyond the capacities of the state. It exists as a relational space with "layers of governance relationships" that shape interactions and conflicts among key parties, including platform companies, labor, governments, the public, and other actors (Gorwa, 2019, p. 5). While this framework of governance is especially pertinent in the presumably pluralistic, fragmented, and competitive societies characteristic of Western democracy (Hong & Goodnight, 2022), it is becoming increasingly applicable to China's digital economy, as the Chinese state must negotiate with market and corporate forces, supranational interests, and networked publics (Hong, 2017; A. Zhang, 2024).

First and foremost, platforms are often agents of governance rather than mere objects of it. In various realms of social life such as cultural production and sociality (van Dijck, 2013), urban life (Caprotti & Liu, 2022), financial activities (Wang, 2021), and labor practices (L. Zhang, 2023a), platforms have asserted their power to govern. They do so not only through architectural design and algorithmic control but also through techno-political strategies. As a result, platforms come into direct competition with states and public institutions (Törnberg, 2023).

Lin and Guo's empirical study of one of China's largest online education platforms demonstrates how platforms can exploit labor dependency to circumvent state regulations. Connecting Chinese students to online English teachers in North America, the platform creates what the authors term



“disguised precarity” for these teachers, who are mostly female, for example, stay-at-home moms and military wives, with limited access to traditional job markets. This group often reported relatively high job satisfaction despite the platform’s strict control over the content and processes of their work. During the 2020–2023 law enforcement campaign, state restrictions on transnational online teaching by foreign educators outside of China caused a massive loss of laborers. However, the platform capitalized on its geographically unrestricted digital infrastructure to establish offshore branches and overseas user accounts, thereby bypassing the restrictions and continuing to serve young Chinese customers. Simultaneously, it intensified the insecurity, isolation, and dependence of its remaining workforce, particularly older, retired teachers.

Similarly, Chan’s study of food delivery rider unrest in Hong Kong examines how platform architecture—encompassing its technological, legal, and organizational dimensions—shapes both the labor process and the expression of solidarity during strikes. The study concludes that algorithmic control serves as a tool to demobilize workers and suppress solidarity, thereby influencing the trajectory of labor unrest. At the same time, the strikes by platform workers tended to manifest as cycles of collective contention rather than isolated, spontaneous protest events.

The governance of labor by platforms in China must be understood within the broader context of historical changes to the labor regime during the country’s post-socialist transition. The relaxation of state controls on labor mobility has led to a surge in rural migrant workers taking up urban service jobs, such as ride-hailing and food delivery. However, government regulations have struggled to keep pace with this rapid shift. While recent policies aim to improve social protections for migrant workers, they were not designed to address the rise of flexible employment in the platform economy. This problem is further exacerbated by local governments prioritizing GDP growth and employment over enforcing labor protections, as well as by the state’s strict control over union formation and labor non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to maintain social stability (A. Zhang, 2024).

Moreover, the space of platform governance is also open for private, corporate, or non-state governance structures as possible avenues of regulation in China (Gorwa, 2019). For instance, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), a traditional soft form of corporate accountability, has emerged as a suitable self-regulation strategy for Chinese platforms in response to increasingly stringent regulatory environment in China. Li and Zhang’s article in this issue focuses on Tencent’s organizational restructuring, particularly the creation of the Sustainable Social Value (SSV) division and accompanying corporate discourses. These practices aim to bolster Tencent’s legitimacy through investments in public-benefiting initiatives and enterprises, while simultaneously identifying and capitalizing on business opportunities that arise from these efforts. The authors describe platforms as

“institutional chameleon” whose impact and nature are contingent on the regulatory and institutional environments in which they operate. By aligning with governmental agendas and dynamically adapting to ongoing policy changes, Tencent’s SSV programs integrate both greater social accountability and market profits into the platform’s operational strategies.

These cases are only a few new additions to the accruing body of evidence that the Chinese state cannot deduce its governance logic simply from an autocratic agenda of control and security. In practice, it must compete, negotiate, and collaborate with market-based structures of force both domestically and globally across multiple scales to achieve its techno-economic goals (Hong & Goodnight, 2022).

On the global level, the tension between globalizing forces and local interests presents similar challenges for platform governance worldwide. However, variations in judicial, social, and cultural perspectives on the state’s role and corporate-government relations have led to distinct governance models. China’s state-driven approach is often described as a “command-and-control system,” characterized by market restrictions and a strong emphasis on techno-nationalism (Bradford, 2023, p. 82). This model is frequently contrasted with the U.S. techno-libertarian approach, which prioritizes market competition, and the EU’s rights-based approach, which emphasizes a fair marketplace and cyber sovereignty.

It is against this backdrop, platform governance regarding two prominent Chinese platforms, namely, Didi Global, a riding-hailing platform, and TikTok, the overseas branch of Chinese social media company ByteDance, has taken shape. The two high-profile cases reflect both the common challenges and converging tendencies in platform governance amid the rising tides of security-oriented techno-nationalism under the changing geopolitical circumstances. As part of the 2020–2023 law enforcement campaign, Chinese authorities’ regulatory actions against Didi Global over its violations of data security and personal information protection laws shortly after its NYSE IPO in 2020 reflected the country’s long-term emphasis on data security and state sovereignty. At the same time, these actions were a direct response to heightened U.S. demands for information transparency, as exemplified by the Holding Foreign Companies Accountable Act (HFCA), issued shortly before Didi’s IPO (Liu, 2021). Simultaneously, the U.S. government’s multiple attempts to restrict, acquire, or ban TikTok mark a dramatic departure from its previous free-market stance, prompting the Chinese government to impose further restrictions on algorithm exports. Thus, the politics of data collection, storage, and usage—a cornerstone of platform economy—has become the key battleground in global geopolitical struggles. In this context, Masso, Grotto, and Lauriault propose a novel approach to studying global data flows in their article. Such theorization efforts can stimulate dialogue and help identify strategies to understand the economic, political, infrastructural, and cultural processes that are deeply intertwined with global data movements.

## Platform Spatiality and Geopolitics

As a contemporary form of global capitalist production, the platform often operates on the premise of the “free” global trade regime, relying on frictionless flows of finance, labor, and information. While a universal and transnational phenomenon, platform capitalism, however, needs to negotiate with local state-capital dynamics, and increasingly, global geopolitics. Its shape and consequences, therefore, are often contingent of local actions and contexts (Törnberg, 2023).

Operating between global and local dynamics under a lean and efficient façade, digital platforms often employ spatializing strategies through legal and organizational arrangements to navigate multiple locales and spatial relationships during their geographical expansion (Jia, this issue). Platform spatiality therefore has emerged as an informative analytical lens, illuminating how platforms enable extractive logics through such practices as spatial scaling (maneuvering across multiple operation sites to bypass local regulatory hurdles to facilitate capital flow and profit sharing), boundary making (restructuring corporate finance, operation, and publicity to maintain local identity and affiliation in the rising tides of techno-nationalism); techno-spatializing (e.g., mobilizing and materializing local resources to expand in rural China, and valorizing affective and emotional values to create Wanghong economy in urban areas).

In her study of VIEs, a corporate structure widely adopted by publicly-listed China-based platforms, Jia illustrates how platforms navigate local barriers to facilitate the entry and expansion of capital, thereby enabling cycles of financial flows and profit sharing. VIEs allow Chinese platform companies to exploit regulatory gaps, disperse corporate structures across different jurisdictions, secure offshore financing, and maintain onshore production. Furthermore, VIEs not only highlight the ability of Chinese platforms to capitalize on opportunities within existing politico-economic frameworks but also reveal their reliance on the long-established Anglo-American financial system (see also L. Li, 2024).

Despite their alignment with global capital, however, the rise of Chinese platform companies is seen by some as a direct challenge to Silicon Valley’s dominance in digital technologies. More significantly, Chinese platforms and their associated infrastructures—such as data centers, cloud computing, and 5G networks—have fueled concerns in the West about the emergence of a new network paradigm led by China as a rising power. This paradigm is perceived as challenges to the existing U.S.-led geopolitical and economic order, which has until recently centered on a free global digital trade regime. This regime opposes internet censorship, mandatory technology transfers, data localization, and other forms of nationalistic protectionism, all aimed at upholding the dominant position of U.S. digital platforms (Rolf & Schindler, 2023).

In this context, China’s emphasis on cyber sovereignty—as a framework for national development and security, inter-state relations, and a governance principle for global

cyberspace—was initially viewed as a radical departure from the free trade norm (Creemers, 2020). Increasingly, however, countries worldwide have adopted similar stances in response to the exploitative dynamics of data-driven platform capitalism. Both emerging economies and the EU have implemented protective measures such as data localization to assert greater control over their data resources (Basu, 2020; Creemers, 2020; Roguski, 2020). More recently, the United States has also shifted toward a security-oriented nationalist policy framework, as the TikTok ongoing saga demonstrates, to address perceived challenges posed by Chinese platforms’ data practices and state-led global infrastructure initiatives.

Despite these techno-nationalist developments, Digital China continues to emphasize openness and international cooperation through its ongoing support for the Digital Silk Road (DSR) initiative (State Council, 2023). From China’s perspective, indigenous innovation is intrinsically linked to an outward-looking strategy aimed at enhancing its innovation capacity and global competitiveness (Simon, 2021, p. 116). Launched in 2015, the DSR reflects the Chinese state’s attempts to craft a cohesive brand and narrative to advance its global vision across diverse technological domains (Eurasia Group, 2020). In practice, however, the initiative is largely driven by the competitive capabilities of private Chinese tech companies providing OTT and infrastructure services in emerging global markets. While the DSR underscores China’s intricate and evolving state-platform nexus, platforms—privately owned, state-enabled, and globally expanding infrastructural forces—are often perceived as instruments for exerting dominance over the techno-economic sectors of recipient countries, particularly within the emerging economies of the Global South (Rolf & Schindler, 2023; Tse & Pun, 2024). This raises concerns that the vision of a multipolar, decentralized, and equitable international order could instead give way to a new form of imperialist hegemony. In this context, how Digital China addresses critical global issues such as developmental justice and planetary futures has become more relevant than ever.

## Digital China—Beyond “Platformization” and “Infrastructuralization”

The “platform turn” that emerged across various disciplines around the 2010s brought forward a new framework for understanding the global digital economy. While early studies in the rapidly expanding field of platform studies primarily focused on uncovering the technological, commercial, and discursive characteristics of monopoly platform companies (e.g., Gillespie, 2010; Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Srnicek, 2016; van Dijck et al., 2018), more recent research has moved to explore the varied experiences of platformization outside the contexts of Euro-American contexts and beyond the dominance of Silicon Valley’s Big Tech (e.g., Athique & Parthasarathi, 2020; Davis & Xiao, 2021; de kloet et al.,

2019; Poell et al., 2024; Steinberg et al., 2022; Steinberg & Li, 2017; Zhang, 2020).

Critically engaging with existing endeavors, this special issue emphasizes a broad political-economic approach to the platform economy, viewing it as part of an emerging new social contract being forged between the state, capital, and labor in China. This broad political economy approach aims to critically unpack and radically contextualize the prevalent concepts of “platformization” and “infrastructuralization.” These concepts are derived from the historical experience of advanced capitalist societies, where traditional infrastructure—once provided or regulated by governments as a public good—has been transformed into deregulated, privatized, and “platformized” models during the height of neoliberal transitions (Plantin et al., 2018). However, in their application, the focus is often reduced to an emphasis of a set of universal technological features, such as digital interfaces, data streams, and algorithms, which are considered not only the defining features of the platforms but also primary drivers of their expansion into infrastructural entities in many public domains. Similarly, the critical thesis of “the platform society” centers on “an (overwhelmingly corporate) global online platform ecosystem that is driven by algorithms and fueled by data.” The unprecedented power of “infrastructural platforms” is attributed to their unique power to “connect and combine data streams and fuse information and intelligence” (van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 4, 16).

Similar techno-economic patterns have been identified in the Chinese context, where platforms acquire infrastructural properties through practices such as intra-operability and the commodification of data (de Kloet et al., 2019). As a result, platforms reshape economic activities and social interactions in the interest of the private platform companies (Plantin & De Seta, 2019). While “the intrusive role of the state” is frequently acknowledged in discussions of the Chinese context, it is often limited to areas related to surveillance and control, overlooking broader dimensions of state involvement (de Kloet, et al., 2019, p. 252).

As many empirical studies quoted in this special issue have shown, the role of digital platforms as infrastructures is not necessarily a unidirectionally corporate-or state-led development. Neither are platform-enabled infrastructures one-fit-all structures with little regard for geographical specificity, and local technological capacities, economic and development priorities. The studies in this issue collectively examine platforms and their infrastructural potentials within China’s historical context, explore the evolving relationship between the state and platforms in the country’s shifting governance regimes, and analyze the implications of its platform economy in the changing geopolitical landscape. By grounding “platform capitalism” in Chinese experiences, this special issue offers a step forward in both complementing and challenging the assumptions underlying mainstream platform studies.

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