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Platformize Asia—Reimagining Asia in Platform Capitalism

Lin Zhang[1] (iD) and Jingyan Elaine Yuan[2] (iD)

Abstract

This introduction repositions "platform" and "Asia" as unstable, contested imaginaries rather than fixed objects of analysis. Bringing platform studies into dialogue with Asian studies, we argue for a double move of deconstruction and reconstruction: interrogating how platforms are historically framed through metaphors, archives, and business genealogies, and how "Asia" has been imagined through colonial, Cold War, and postcolonial projects. Using Asia as method, we show how regional trajectories of platformization—superapps and platform business groups, infrastructuralization, and the absorption of informal economies—both provincialize Euro-American frameworks and generate new concepts. At a conjuncture marked by an uneven transition beyond neoliberalism, platforms in Asia formalize informality, extend state infrastructures, and mediate global capital, producing hybrid labor regimes and renewed state–platform entanglements while intensifying inequalities. We organize the special issue around four productive tensions: (1) technological/media affordances vs. cultural specificities; (2) methodological localism vs. theory-building; (3) state power vs. transnationalism; and (4) inter-Asia references vs. power inequalities. Across these frictions, contributors trace alternative genealogies (e.g., from Japanese convenience stores to K-pop fandom platforms), analyze platformized labor and entrepreneurial subjectivities, and rethink governance through fragmented, conjunctural state formations. We contend that metaphors are useful to think with—yet the dominance of "platform" as a corporate framing also calls for critical pivots to alternative figures that open different political and analytic possibilities. Viewed from Asia, platform capitalism appears as a dynamic, contested world-making process that renders visible the uneven, emergent shapes of post-neoliberal futures.

Keywords

platform, Asia, post-neoliberal

Introduction

The so-called "platform turn" of the 2010s placed this new form of social economic organization at the center of scholarly debates across media studies, political economy, and many other social sciences and humanities disciplines. Initially, platforms were understood as the vanguard of the digital economy built on algorithmic control, datafication, and financialization, and epitomized by Silicon Valley firms such as Facebook, Google, and Amazon (Bogost & Montfort, 2009; Dijck et al., 2018; Rahman & Thelen, 2019; Srnicek, 2016). Over time, platform studies has grown into a diverse and interdisciplinary area encompassing a multitude of critical projects and political-economic realities. Yet what unites its many approaches is an assumption that "the platform" is a stable category—whether defined in technical, economic, or political terms. Recent scholarship, however, has shown that "platform" is not simply a descriptive label but a constructed

imaginary: a term that crystallizes within particular archives, genealogies, and epistemic communities. Platforms come into view through acts of framing, metaphor, and narrative, which elevate certain histories while effacing others (Apperley & Parikka, 2018; Lim, 2025; Steinberg, 2019; Steinberg et al., 2025; Wu, 2024).

A similar dynamic shapes the study of Asia, a concept with external roots in ancient Greek geography, colonial orientalism, and Cold War area studies (Sakai et al., 2023). As an interdisciplinary formation emerged from this legacy, Asian studies has struggled to reconfigure itself through

[1]University of New Hampshire, USA
[2]University of Illinois Chicago, USA

Corresponding Author:
Lin Zhang, University of New Hampshire, 20 Academic Way, Durham, NH 03820, USA.
Email: Lin.zhang@unh.edu

postcolonial critique, globalization discourse, and recent intellectual projects such as "Global Asias" and "Asia as method" (K.-H. Chen, 2010; T. Chen & Hayot, 2015). While platform studies is at risk of reifying Silicon Valley as its point of reference, Asian studies is often criticized for over-emphasizing the cultural specificities of Asia. Both fields, in other words, are grounded in imaginaries that must be interrogated.

This special issue seeks to place platforms and Asia in dialogue to achieve a double deconstruction and reconstruction. Rather than treating platforms as universal techno-economic structures or Asia as a fixed cultural essence, we approach both as unstable, contested, and evolving formations. This does not diminish the material realities or cultural significance of either concept. Instead, we aim to show how platforms are continually remade through shifting configurations of technology, business, governance, and culture, while "Asia" itself is invoked through competing historical entanglements, geopolitical projects, and cultural constructions. To rethink platform capitalism in and with Asia, then, is to open up both concepts—to trace how they intersect, refract, and transform one another through the dense interplay of material infrastructures, political economies, and cultural imaginaries.

This perspective highlights how Asia's empirical dynamism—its heterogeneity, speed, rich histories, and contradictions—reshapes both the practice and theorization of platform capitalism, and vice versa. Rather than radically disrupting existing economic forms, platforms in Asia often graft onto long-standing regimes of production and exchange, reinventing rather than erasing local and traditional markets (Athique & Parthasarathi, 2020; Zhang, 2020aa). In contexts such as India and China, digital platforms mediate between state projects, global capital, and vast informal economies, producing hybrid configurations of labor and entrepreneurship (Davis & Xiao, 2021; Mukherjee, 2019). Infrastructuralization takes distinctive forms across the region, as governments mobilize platforms for public purposes ranging from administrative efficiency to poverty alleviation (J. Y. Chen, 2020; De Kloet et al., 2019; Ngai, 2024; Plantin & de Seta, 2019; Plantin et al., 2018; Yuan & Zhang, 2025; Yuan & Zhao, 2025). The friction between platforms as profit-seeking ventures and as infrastructures serving collective goals is worked out through the interplay of state policy, corporate strategy, and citizen practice. At the same time, informal labor regimes reveal both the expansion of algorithmic control and the persistence of deeply localized dynamics, spanning energized middle-class consumerism to precarious rural livelihoods.

Seen in this way, Asia is neither merely an empirical counterpoint to Silicon Valley, nor a regional supplement to global theory. It is a generative site where platform capitalism's contradictions are rendered visible and where new conceptual possibilities emerge. At the same time, engagement with platform studies provides Asian studies with resources to grapple with its own challenges as the field seeks to shake off its orientalist and Cold War origins and methodological nationalism with frameworks of globalization, postcolonial hybridity, and transnationalism. Deploying "Asia as method," for instance, has been an attempt to multiply reference points and foreground the heterogeneous forces—colonial, imperial, internal—that shape the region (K.-H. Chen & Chua, 2007). The politics of imagining Asia is today inseparable from the politics of platforms, as digital technologies mediate everything from inter-Asian flows of culture and capital to US-China geopolitical rivalries and anti-Asian racialization during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Bringing platform studies and Asian studies together thus compels us to rethink both fields at a critical conjuncture. Indeed, Asia at the current conjuncture is fraught with tensions as the post-Cold-War US-led global order is destabilized amid the contested rise of China and the growing interdependence of regional economies, regardless of ongoing US-China decoupling. Asian economies and technologies are gaining unprecedented prominence. Platforms and digital infrastructures sit at the heart of these shifts: from supply chain disruption and restructuring, inter-regional flows of capital, goods, technologies, and labor, new restrictions of foreign capital and businesses, to discursive battles over racism and xenophobia, and debates about different models of political governance and economic development. They make visible the unevenness of global capitalism and the limits of existing theoretical vocabularies. To analyze them requires an openness to the instability of our key categories, an attentiveness to historical entanglements, and a willingness to treat friction and contradiction as generative rather than as problems to be solved.

The contributions to this special issue take up this challenge. Situated at the confluence of platform studies and Asian studies, we set out to bring together scholars working at the intersection of these two lines of scholarship for productive dialogue. In our original call for papers, we invited our contributors to think about what we could gain by rethinking platform studies *in and with* Asia. How could our engagement with platforms help advance Asian studies at the new conjuncture?

The contributors to this special issue do not offer a single coherent framework; instead, we embrace what T. Chen (2018) called the "structured incoherence" of Global Asias: the productive coexistence of contradictions, divergences, and overlapping priorities. The articles move between different scales, methods, and theoretical lenses, exploring tensions between technological affordances and cultural specificities, between methodological localism and theory-building, between state power and transnational processes, and between inter-Asia references and inequalities. Through these frictions, they reimagine both the platform and Asia not as fixed objects but as ongoing, contested projects—imaginaries that shape and are shaped by the shifting terrain of global capitalism. In the pages that follow, we offer a brief

critical reading of the histories of platform studies and Asian studies, laying the groundwork for our introduction to the contributions, which we situate around four sets of productive tensions at their intersection.

Deconstructing Platform Studies

The mainstream genealogy of early platform studies is often mapped onto a tripartite structure of affordances, business and management, and political economy. Nieborg and Poell's (2018) influential survey, for example, identified three main strands of research on platformization: software studies, business studies, and political economy. The software studies strand can be traced to MIT's *Platform Studies* book series, launched in 2009 (Lim, 2025). Taking a materialist perspective, this work approached platforms not as abstract business models but as concrete configurations of hardware and software that shape creative production (Bogost & Montfort, 2009). Scholars in business studies saw platforms through the lens of "multisided markets," emphasizing their economic mechanisms and managerial strategies (Nieborg and Poell, 2018, p. 4277). Political economists, meanwhile, pursued a more critical path, situating platforms in histories of ownership, inequality, and labor. Nick Srnicek's (2016) *Platform Capitalism*, as a canonical example, theorized the rise of platforms as a trans-Atlantic story of digital capital.

Since the latter half of the 2010s, when monopoly platforms consolidated power worldwide, platform studies itself has expanded rapidly into a creative, cacophonous, and deeply interdisciplinary research area. Scholars began not only to extend the early focus on Silicon Valley and Western Europe but also to question whether its frameworks applied to the "majority world," and to interrogate the politics of knowledge production within the field. Some compelling work has shown how platform studies were constructed from privileged perspectives with linear narratives, and offered alternative genealogies of what platforms are and how they are lived.

In Game studies, Apperley and Parikka (2018) asked what kinds of archives and assumptions shaped the stories scholars told about platforms and urged a cross-pollination between platform studies and media archeology, "opening" platforms to new contexts and complicating simple oppositions between old and new media (p. 364). As they observed that "platforms are not recalled and rediscovered through platform studies, rather in the process of 'doing' platform studies, a uniform platform is produced." (Apperley & Parikka, 2018, p. 353). Feminist scholars argued that the technical materiality of platforms cannot be disentangled from the identities, bodies, and representations of their users (Anable, 2018). Singh and Banet-Weiser (2022), for example, invited us to rethink feminist visibility through earlier "platforms" such as the witch's gallows, the slave auction block, and the platform shoe, turning our attention to how context, medium, and content shape "the platform."

Within critical sociology, McMillan Cottom (2020) argued that the entanglement of platforms with racial capitalism reanimated long-standing logics of inequality through mechanisms of "obfuscation as privatization" and "exclusion by inclusion" (p. 441). Building on this critique with an anti-colonial lens, Lim (2025) situated platform theory alongside the operations of the East India Company in Malaya, exposing continuities in capitalist governance, dispossession, and management—now intensified and scaled through digital platforms (p. 47). Taking a different genealogical route, Steinberg (2019) traced platform logics through Japan rather than California, linking digital platforms to Toyota's just-in-time production system and demonstrating how techniques honed in automobile manufacturing migrated into mobile communication and eventually crystallized in Asia's super-apps such as KakaoTalk, LINE, and WeChat.

Taken together, these interventions highlight not only the multiple histories of platform capitalism but also the inequalities embedded in its global operations (McMillan Cottom, 2020; Steinberg et al., 2025). The field itself is evolving, propelled by what Pollio (2025) calls perspectives from "Silicon Elsewhere," which press scholars in the Global North toward greater reflexivity. As Poell and colleagues (2025) insist, postcolonial and decolonial epistemic shifts will only materialize when Euro-American scholars recognize their own contexts as specific rather than universal (p. 17).

Yet this project of decolonizing platform studies remains incomplete if it stops at merely "provincializing" research on Anglo-American and Western European platforms, while continuing to treat Asia and other historically marginalized regions as case studies, supplementary material, or sites for empiricist and culturalist comparison. Or as self-evident in its geographies. To approach Asia as a theoretical agent and methodological anchor for platform research requires a fundamental rethinking of Asian studies itself—along with its historical entanglements in colonial orientalism, Cold War area studies, and neoliberal presentism. After all, the concept of "Asia" is no less constructed than that of "platform." A brief engagement with the politics of imagining Asia is therefore necessary before we can begin to reimagine Asia within the context of platform capitalism.

Politics of Imagining Asia

Since ancient Greek geographers used the term to describe the lands east of the Mediterranean (Green, 2022), Asia has come to designate a vast, heterogeneous space—home to 60 percent of the world's population, nearly half of global GDP, and more than half of internet users. Yet knowledge about Asia has always been politically charged: a tool wielded by colonizers to justify subjugation and violence, but also by anticolonial thinkers and revolutionaries striving for development, autonomy, and self-determination. Such knowledge was also mobilized within Asia as part of colonization projects, such as Japan's reference to Western Orientalism as a

means of situating its own "liberation" of Asia during the Pacific War.

Much of the conceptual architecture for Asian Studies in Anglophone contexts—whether in relation to platforms, technologies, or media—bears the imprint of Cold War "area studies". Rather than breaking from colonial vocabularies of "European humanity" and the othering of colonized peoples, area studies absorbed and repackaged them (Sakai et al., 2023, p. 4). Its consolidation in the mid-twentieth century mirrored the rise of Pax Americana, as the United States displaced Europe as the leader of the so-called "free world" and constructed its own global epistemology (Morris-Suzuki, 2020, p. 10). As Sakai and colleagues (2023) put it, "while coloniality under erasure was practiced overseas, the transition to civic nationalism without decolonization was practiced at home" (p. 5).

Vukovich (2013) observed that dichotomous frameworks such as "liberal vs. authoritarian" refract colonial discourse through a Cold War lens (p. 600). Citing George Kennan's view of totalitarianism as "Oriental despotism plus modern technology," he contended Cold War area studies did not abolish colonial logics but rather rearticulated them as part of Cold War political culture. Traces of this discourse persist today, visible in research on Twitter's role in the Arab Spring and in the enduring "authoritarianism versus democracy" framing of Chinese platforms.

The epistemological authority of area studies began to fracture after the Cold War. By the 1990s, critiques mounted from multiple directions: progressive scholars accused the field of serving U.S. hegemony (Lanza, 2017), while social scientists found it methodologically thin (Kelley, 2020). In its place, new approaches flourished. Globalization, postcolonialism, transnationalism, and comparativism displaced methodological nationalism, recasting Asia as a dynamic set of connections rather than bounded nation-states.

Parallel to these intellectual shifts, a new wave of cultural regionalization unfolded within Asia itself. From the 1980s to the late 1990s, Japan spearheaded projects of cultural and economic integration of Asia, driven by trade, investment, and popular culture (Ching, 2000; Duara, 2015). Since the turn of the millennium, Asia's resurgence has extended far beyond Japan. The Korean Wave, propelled by K-pop and TV dramas after the 1997 Asian financial crisis (K.-H. Chen & Chua, 2007), Bollywood's global reach through diasporic networks (Punathambekar, 2013), and China's ascent from manufacturing hub to digital superpower (Hjorth & Khoo, 2015) have transformed Asia into both a cultural and technological powerhouse.

These transformations have sparked new intellectual projects to reimagine Asia. The Inter-Asia Cultural Studies movement, emerging in the early 2000s, advanced a relational and translocal framework that dismantled Cold War area studies boundaries. By foregrounding shared colonial legacies and post-Cold War economic integration, it treated Asia as a web of intersecting trajectories rather than a collection of discrete nation-states (K.-H. Chen, 2010; K.-H. Chen & Chua, 2007). Beyond the regional approach, initiatives like Verge: Studies in Global Asias and the broader Global Asias paradigm sought to move past center–periphery models that cast Asia as the object of Western study.

This shift has been amplified by the global expansion of digital platforms since 2008, which not only made Asia central to platform capitalism but also rendered Asia itself newly global in terms of technological innovation, business models, and affective structures. As Asia entered the era of platform capitalism, Asian studies in the realm of culture, media, and technologies shifted from a preoccupation with cultural content (notably film and literature) to the infrastructures of circulation and distribution. Platforms became one of the primary sites through which media, labor, and capital were reorganized, foregrounding new questions about how technological affordances intersect with cultural and political specificities and differentiated developments within Asia (Lamarre, 2015, 2017; Steinberg & Li, 2017)

This shift coincided with the rapid rise of China and other late-developing economies in South and Southeast Asia, where compressed processes of platformization produced distinctive forms such as superapps and mega-platforms. Companies like WeChat, Grab, Line, and Reliance Jio not only drew on each other's models but also developed integrated ecosystems that extended far beyond the sectoral silos typical of Silicon Valley. In China, platform business groups such as Alibaba and Tencent leveraged both global venture capital and state backing to build infrastructures that rivaled American platforms, while simultaneously transforming rural industries, reorganizing informal labor, and cultivating entrepreneurial subjectivities (Athique & Kumar, 2022; Jia & Kenney, 2022; Yuan & Zhang, 2025; Zhang, 2025). These developments underline how Asia has become a central site where the boundaries of the platform form itself are tested, stretched, and redefined.

At the same time, questions of power and sovereignty in Asian platformization have ushered in what Qiu (2023a) calls the "geopoliticalization" of platforms. Asia's platform economies are increasingly interpreted through the prism of state-centered competition, particularly the tech rivalry between the United States and China. Yet this framing coexists with new dynamics in regionalization and the persistence of transnational linkages, investment flows, and cultural circulations, as well as existing and new forms of inequalities and asymmetrical development that exceed simple state-to-state logics. Seen from Asia, platform capitalism is not an imported model but a dynamic, contested process that is simultaneously economic, cultural, and geopolitical—one that pushes platform studies to grapple with distributional infrastructures, distinct corporate and business models, evolving state-business/capital relations, informal labor, and variegated global futures.

Reimagining Asia in Platform Capitalism

Our brief review of Asian studies at the nexus of culture and media technologies foregrounds Asia and Asian studies as a socially produced praxis—shaped by shifting historical entanglements, changing material conditions, and vicissitudes of political alliances and conflicts, rather than static geographic or civilizational boundaries and unchanging epistemologies. Reimagining Asia in platform capitalism at the current and critical conjuncture of weakening U.S.-led world order and rising Asian power allows us to see how the unstable formation of platform capitalism and the imaginary of Asia mutually transform each other as they collectively reconfigure the material shape and feeling structure of the world at the cusp of post-neoliberalism (Peck & Theodore, 2019).

Chen described the "structured incoherence" in Global Asias as the coexistence of overlapping and embedded contradictions—field versus discipline, Asian studies versus Asian American studies, regional differences, and divergent theoretical priorities. This productive instability, manifested through juxtaposition and friction, enables Global Asias to theorize across and beyond the institutional and disciplinary boundaries: a generative condition to be deliberately embraced rather than resolving into harmony (T. Chen, 2018). In curating and editing this special issue, we adopt Chen's praxis of structured incoherence to foreground a set of productive tensions in analyzing the material economy of platform capitalism concerning Asia: between technological specificities and cultural specificities, between methodological localism and theory-building, between state power and transnationalism, and between inter-Asia references and power inequalities. We now turn to these tensions.

Technological/Media Affordances Versus Cultural Specificities

A close engagement with Asia helps us better attend to a set of material and political-economic shifts brought about by the concurrent rise of platform capitalism and Asia. In comparison to the previous research on Asia-originated and inter-Asia flow of media and culture, which focused primarily on "exchange of contents", platform studies ushered in "a paradigm shift in Asian media geographies" where "the interconnectivity of distribution platforms" is foregrounded (Steinberg & Li, 2017). This shift brings our first productive tension between *technological and media affordances and cultural specificities*. As we asked in our call for papers: how can we find a balance between close analysis of platform affordances/properties and thick description of locale-specificities and complexities?

Maitra and Chow, in their discussion of "new media in Asia," caution against approaches that essentialize the region as a bounded cultural entity and instead call for attention to the "material and infrastructural difference between digital multiplicities" (Maitra & Chow, 2015, p. 20). In a similar vein, Lamarre emphasizes infrastructures of distribution over content production, resisting reductions to national or territorial frames (Lamarre, 2015, p. 113). He later theorizes "platformativity" as a conceptual tool to capture the intra-actions between platforms and humans, as well as between individuals and collectives, without collapsing into methodological individualism (Lamarre, 2017, p. 301). Extending these insights, Steinberg and Li (2017) argue that the distributional politics of platforms generate new forms of regional affinity and intimacy, fueling "a new wave of media regionalism with a renewed regional media geography" (pp. 179–180).

In this special issue, Marc Steinberg's account of an alternative history of the platform economy through Japanese convenience stores offers a compelling way to unsettle Silicon Valley–centric narratives of platform capitalism without reifying an essentialized notion of Asia or fixing what constitutes a platform. By tracing the genealogy of "convenience" as a shared affect produced through encounters with platforms, he mobilizes an assemblage of technological innovations, transnational and inter-regional borrowings, government policy negotiations, and entrepreneurial acumen to reorient both the "where" and the "how" of platforms via transnational Asia and beyond the digital present. As he argues, "the convenience store is one site from which to see the inter-Asian connectivity of the platform economy, as well as its local variations" (Steinberg, 2025, p. 8).

Extending Steinberg's insights, Renyi Hong and Kuansong Victor Zhuang turn to the dashcam—an artifact not usually considered a platform—to examine how "injury is constructed for the platform economy" in postcolonial Singapore (Hong & Zhuang, 2025, p. 2). They show how the dashcam's affordances—an ambient device mounted on a vehicle dashboard that collects telematic and audiovisual data for public sharing—intersect with Singapore's colonial legacies of congested roads, non-standard labor conditions, and persistent inequalities along lines of class, ethnicity, and immigration status. In this context, the dashcam becomes a key site for rendering visible the structural injuries faced by food delivery riders. Yet this platformized visibility is ambivalent: while it offers working-class riders a potential venue for public justice, it also turns their injuries into spectacles that can be consumed and exploited for profit (Hong & Zhuang, 2025, p. 1).

Aditya Ray's contribution further develops the call by Maitra and Chow to disaggregate Asia, as he critiques "the discourse of technological leapfrogging within dominant Asian development models" (Ray, 2025, p. 1). Advancing a Critical Postcolonial Political Economy (CPPE) framework, he urges scholars to analyze technological development in late-developing Asian nations such as India, China, and the Philippines by tracing the contestation among diverse social

forces, challenging teleological narratives of progress through attention to "plural temporalities," and employing "conjuncture thinking" to examine how shifting material and social relations create new openings and ruptures (Ray, 2025, p. 5). Ray's postcolonial approach thus offers a theoretical pathway for reimagining Asia in its heterogeneity and for moving beyond techno-solutionism.

Methodological Localism Versus Theory Building

From a political-economic perspective, Asia-born platform companies and Asia-grounded experiences of platformization have introduced a set of distinctive characteristics that are reshaping the very future of platform capitalism. Rather than serving as "cases" to which externally generated theories are applied, these experiences highlight the value of "methodological localism": a practice that provincializes Euro-American–centric frameworks while opening new theoretical vantage points (Steinberg et al., 2022). This, in turn, sets up one of the central tensions we highlight in this special issue—*between methodological localism and theory building*. The question is not simply how to "apply" theory to Asia, but how to rethink platform studies with Asia, asking, as we did in our call for papers, how can theories produced in Euro-American contexts be provincialized through Asian experiences, and how can Asian trajectories of platformization generate new concepts without reifying binaries like West versus Asia?

Scholarship on Asian superapps and mega-platforms offers an important entry point into regional specificities of platform capitalism. Examining Alibaba, Tencent, and Trip.com, Jia and Kenney (2022) show how Chinese "platform business groups" (PBGs) pursued strategies distinct from U.S. firms' reliance on acquisitions, organic growth, and venture capital. Through cross-investments and partial sell-offs that preserved control, Chinese PBGs cultivated a competitive ecosystem shaped by China's rapid leap into mobile internet markets under relatively protected conditions and in the absence of strong antitrust precedents. Athique and Kumar (2022) describe a similarly "compressed" process of platformization in India, where multiple phases of expansion—infrastructure, services, and content—were pursued simultaneously, often by the same actors. In such contexts, the drive for market dominance has been especially intense, yielding a uniquely accelerated form of platform capitalism (pp. 1248–1249). Meanwhile, Qiu and Chan (2025) analyze SoftBank's unconventional "cluster strategy," which invests in groups of "number one" firms across diverse Asian markets. They trace this approach to Japan's historic keiretsu model, itself rooted in settler colonialism and wartime planning of the 1930s. These works underscore how regional histories and intra-Asian capital flows shape platform economies, reminding us that business models like the superapp cannot be understood apart from the circulation of management ideas and corporate strategies across Asia.

Equally significant is the way platformization has extended into labor and everyday livelihoods in Asia. In many late-developing countries with large informal sectors, such as China, India, and Indonesia, platforms have been championed by developmental states as vehicles for digital entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial citizenship (Irani, 2019; Zhang, 2023). Yet, as Athique and Parthasarathi (2020) point out, platformization in India has not been about creating wholly new sectors but about absorbing informal economies into digital circuits (p. 4). In this way, platforms expand capitalist frontiers while reframing precarious labor as opportunity.

In this special issue, Rahul Mukherjee offers a detailed ethnographic account of the aspirational and entrepreneurial subjectivities cultivated by homegrown Indian short-video platforms such as Moj and Josh in a post-TikTok landscape (Mukherjee, 2025). He traces how these platforms, stepping into the space vacated by TikTok, have harnessed the vernacular creativity of grassroots content creators in Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities and villages through intermediary agents such as talent scouts, content directors, and studio heads. At the same time, his analysis reveals the limits of such entrepreneurial reinvention, shaped by creators' resistance to platform-imposed, click-driven commercialization and professionalization; the state's infrastructural and logistical shortcomings; and India's relatively constrained middle-class consumer market. These dynamics unfold within the conjuncture of the post-2022 downturn, when the global venture capital boom receded amid rising interest rates in the United States.

In a similar vein, Lin Zhang (2025) further demonstrates how e-commerce platforms like Alibaba, drawing on global venture capital networks, "outperformed cumbersome government institutions and state-owned enterprises" in constructing a national e-commerce infrastructure (p. 4). In doing so, they connected China's vast rural and county-level grassroots manufacturers first to the overseas export market and later to an expanding urban middle-class consumer base, echoing Athique and Kumar's observation about layered markets and compressed platformization in India. This contribution extends her early work on state-led platformization since the late 2000s, which has entrepreneurized the rural economy by grafting digital platforms onto existing rural industries and family-based social relations (Zhang, 2020b, 2023) She argues that the platformization of the rural handicraft industry in China destabilized the formal/informal divide and broadened conventional understandings of cultural production.

Comparing platformized gig work in the US and India, Daniel Greene and Zothan Mawii identify key differences between Northern and Southern experiences of platforms and informal labor. In the US, gig work such as driving for Uber often supplements "flagging full-time wages for a relatively small number of workers" in a stagnant post-industrial economy. In contrast, in Global South contexts like India, where "industrial development stalled, platform labor

selectively formalizes a vast wasteland of informal work" (Greene & Mawii, 2025, p. 4). They interpret these differences as products of uneven and combined development under global platform capitalism. While digital platforms capitalize on and formalize informal labor worldwide, "the engine for this process largely remains North financial capital," and "the results differ depending on the state's history with its surplus populations" (Greene & Mawii, 2025, p. 2).

This lingering legacy of colonialism in postcolonial societies is reflected in the contribution by Sai Amulya Komarraju, Manisha Pathak-Shelat, Payal Arora, and Usha Raman. Through historically informed ethnographic research on male Nai-barbers' experiences with platformized service work, they complicate our understanding of the feminization of labor by foregrounding intersections of gender, caste, and colonial histories in India. They situate their "'local' paper not as an exception to the dominant theorizing about the platform economy," but as part of "co-existing tensions" in a globally connected world where global does not mean the opposite of local, but "comparative, plural, overlapping, and entangled" (Komarraju et al., 2025, p. 4).

In contrast to the "outside-in" perspective, which applies theories abstracted from Euro-American experiences to Asian societies to assess their impacts, articles in this special issue adopt a theoretically informed "inside-out" approach to platform capitalism as a planetary force of world-building (Sato & Sonoda, 2021). Rather than being constrained by existing theories about what and where to study or how to frame the story, they are "open to finding what objects, practices, or networks come into view if we start not from what we think we know of the platform economy (online, social, smartphone-mediated) or what is most legible to us as platforms today, from the vantage point of the present" (Steinberg, 2025, p. 8). This methodological localism, exercised in the context of transnational Asia, brings into focus new business forms, overlooked labor relations, and alternative genealogies that urge us to reexamine, modify, and enrich existing theories of platforms.

State Versus Transnationalism

One important dimension of "localism" concerns the role of the nation-state. Several articles in this special issue foreground the state, not as a static entity opposed to globalization, but as a multifaceted, evolving, and fragmented formation whose shifting relations with transnational forces demand closer analysis. This approach resonates with earlier theoretical debates. Both developmental state theory and world-systems theory arose as critiques of modernization theory, which was grounded in Euro-American centrism and optimism about liberal democracy and capitalism. Developmental state theory—drawing largely on Asian cases—emphasized the role of a strong state in guiding late-developing nations as a counterweight to laissez-faire capitalism (Wade, 2018). World-systems theory, by contrast,

rejected modernization's linear, nation-based model, reframing development and underdevelopment as products of a single, historically constituted capitalist world economy (Wallerstein, 2004).

Our current post-neoliberal moment has been marked by the renewed assertion of state power after decades of largely unchecked neoliberal capitalism. This "return of billiard balls" is evident in the rise of state-directed platform capitalism and the US–China tech war, both of which unsettle the (neo)liberal model of the internet that has long underpinned platform studies (Qiu, 2023a). At the same time, it is important to resist competition-centered realism and avoid reproducing the simplistic US–China binary sustained by "New Cold War" narratives (Qiu, 2023b; Steinberg et al., 2022). The contributions to this issue emphasize the persistence of trans-state and transnational linkages that cannot be captured by nation-specific frameworks or reduced to an "us versus them" logic (El-Hibri et al., forthcoming 2025). This points to our third productive tension: *the relationship between the state and transnationalism*. Here, a key question from our call for papers remains central—how might we reconcile the study of transnational and regional connections with attention to local, regional, and national path dependencies?

Lin Zhang addresses this question directly by conceptualizing China's hybrid model of platform governance as a "market in the fragmented state." Her analysis contests dominant narratives that depict the Chinese state as either clashing with or aligning with private platforms (Zhang, 2025, p. 1). Instead, she disaggregates the Chinese state to show how the pragmatic Leninist central government both leverages and constrains private tech giants to maintain a delicate balance, while local governments pursue "fragile symbiosis" with platforms like Alibaba to advance their own political and economic interests (Zhang, 2025, p. 1). She contrasts this hybrid model with the current U.S. oligarchical model, where corporate interests dominate state power. Her analysis of Chinese digital platforms resonates with Wu's tracing of the genealogy of "pingtai" (platform) in China, as the latter locates its origins not in the appeal of market liberalism but in the state's expansion of public services through digital infrastructures (Wu, 2024).

If Zhang builds on developmental state theory to rethink platform governance, Moira Weigel brings the critical lens of world-systems theory to global platform capitalism. Through a comparative analysis of Amazon's marketplace and third-party sellers in China and India, she demonstrates how U.S. platforms continue to "produce new flows of capital and information within and beyond Asia," flows shaped by colonial histories, orientalist imaginaries, and global unevenness (Weigel, 2025, p. 13). Yet she also shows how "U.S. and Chinese platforms continue to co-evolve" and how Amazon spurs contact across Chinese and South Asian platform ecosystems, even amid New Cold War tensions in tech and trade (Weigel, 2025, p. 13). Following Anna Tsing, she calls on platform scholars to grapple not only with "a

multiplicity of (abstractly equivalent) national cultures" but also with the transnational dynamics that animate them (Weigel, 2025, p. 13).

Dal Yong Jin's commentary echoes Weigel's call for transnational perspectives, though with a sharper critique of Silicon Valley's dominance in Asia. Extending his earlier notion of "platform imperialism," he traces a shift from West-to-East flows of cultural content to a deeper form of platform-media control that permeates the entire cultural production chain (Jin, 2025, p. 5). Drawing on industry data, he shows that while some East Asian countries have succeeded in developing homegrown platforms domestically, their influence abroad remains limited. U.S. platform giants, by contrast, continue to expand their power across East Asia, intensifying asymmetrical relations between the United States and the region (Jin, 2025, p. 5).

Finally, Grant Bollmer and Bethany Tillerson situate their analysis of Weverse—a K-pop-centered social media and e-commerce platform—at the intersection of the Korean corporate model and K-pop's global fandom. By introducing the concept of "platform fandom", they highlight South Korea's distinctive approach to platformization (Bollmer & Tillerson, 2025, p. 2). This model aims to move beyond American and Chinese paradigms by leveraging K-pop's transnational appeal to cultivate a global audience for Korean cultural exports (Bollmer & Tillerson, 2025, p. 2). Yet the limits are clear: linguistic and cultural differences hinder automatic translation, and Weverse's tendency to individualize and atomize fan interactions undermines collective fan energies, contributing instead to toxic fandom (Bollmer & Tillerson, 2025, p. 9).

Taken together, these articles reveal that platform capitalism cannot be reduced to national models or great-power binaries: states are fragmented and dynamic, while transnational linkages remain powerful. These cases show how platform studies must navigate the productive tension between state power and global entanglements.

Inter-Asia References Versus Power Inequalities

Throughout this special issue, we see how shifting the reference point away from the "Euro-American core" toward inter-Asia and South–South exchanges generates new knowledge and fresh perspectives for examining digital platforms. Situating superapps within Asian business history and the inter-Asian circulation of capital, business forms, and management ideas not only moves us beyond Euro-American neoliberal norms but also highlights how local path dependencies and the endogenous evolution of state–business relations shape the global diversity of platform economies. The centrality of informal labor to platform operations—and how platforms formalize the informal economy as part of developmental states' populist agendas—further underscores shared experiences across late-developing nations in Asia and beyond.

Yet these commonalities also reveal limits. Comparative studies of national platform economies across Asia highlight significant variations and inequalities, as well as the uneven capacity for inter-Asian borrowing. On Amazon's global marketplace, for instance, Chinese and Indian sellers pursue distinct product categories and branding strategies that reflect their unequal positions within the emerging world system of platform capitalism, even as both remain heavily dependent on wealthier countries for consumer markets and core technologies (Weigel, 2025). Divergent "socio-historical contexts" and "techno-infrastructural trajectories" likewise help explain why Indian short-video apps such as Moj and Josh have struggled to replicate TikTok's success after its forced exit (Mukherjee, 2025). More broadly, the discourse of technological "leapfrogging," abstracted from the East Asian "Four Tigers" model of accelerated manufacturing-led development, cannot be uncritically transplanted to late-developing nations such as India or the Philippines. Instead, these pathways remain contingent on the "indeterminacies of postcolonial development" and each nation's "asymmetrical integration" into global capitalism (Ray, 2025, p. 2).

Reimagining Asia through the lens of platforms thus illuminates both the dynamism of inter-Asian flows—of technologies, business models, and media-cultural practices—and the persistent inequalities that cut across national, regional, and global scales. These inequalities intersect with class, caste, gender, occupation, race, and ethnicity, shaping the uneven trajectories of platform economies within Asia and in relation to the wider world (Hong & Zhuang, 2025; Komarraju et al., 2025).

Conclusion

The articles in this special issue converge on a critical insight: platform economies in Asia cannot be understood as either a simple extension of Silicon Valley models or as a set of discrete national variations. Instead, both platforms and Asia are unstable imaginaries whose meanings emerge from conjunctural struggles over technology, capital, governance, and culture. By foregrounding frictions—between technological affordances and cultural specificities, methodological localism and theory-building, state power and transnational dynamics, inter-Asia references and power inequalities—our contributors show how Asia is not a peripheral stage for platform capitalism but a generative site for rethinking its global trajectories.

This carries particular resonance in the current conjuncture of transitioning into post-neoliberalism. As Peck and Theodore (2019) argue, neoliberalism's end will not arrive as a single global rupture but as a geographically uneven interregnum marked by crises, compromises, and contested alternatives. Asia's proliferating platformization exemplifies this unsettled terrain: platforms formalize informal economies while deepening precarity, extend state infrastructures while

embedding global capital, and generate new regional solidarities even as geopolitical rivalries intensify, and proffer new opportunities for innovation and empowerment while perpetuating existing or generating new inequalities. To study platform capitalism through Asia is to engage with this messy interregnum, to see how neoliberal legacies are being reworked rather than cleanly replaced.

Qiu's (2023b) metaphors of cobwebs and ant societies remind us that platform politics unfold through multilateral networks and grassroots practices as much as through great-power competition. Metaphors like these are helpful to think with: the platform metaphor has enabled critical inquiry, but its limits also invite us to pivot toward alternative figures of thought that resist the framings provided by technology firms and open space for imagining different social and political possibilities. Taken together, these perspectives remind us that post-neoliberalism is not only contested among states and corporations but also within intraplatform struggles, everyday practices, and social movements across Asia and beyond.

Seen in this light, the contributions in this special issue speak to a wider imperative: to approach post-neoliberal futures with open-mindedness, attending to the where, why, and how of platforms as they unfold in Asia and elsewhere (Steinberg, 2025). If neoliberalism was always processual and variegated, its afterlives will be no less so. By situating platform capitalism within Asia's diverse and contested trajectories, we have attempted to generate conceptual tools attuned to the conjunctural instability of our moment. Platforms, in this view, are not just objects of study but windows into the uneven and emergent shapes of post-neoliberalism itself.

ORCID iDs

Lin Zhang [iD] https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6967-2759

Jingyan Elaine Yuan [iD] https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3404-7731

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Author biographies

Lin Zhang (PhD University of Southern California) is an Associate Professor of Communication at the University of New Hampshire. Her research centers on critical innovation studies, focusing on Global China and ethnic Asian people in a global and comparative context. She is the author of *The Labor of Reinvention: Entrepreneurship in the New Chinese Digital Economy* (Columbia University Press, 2023).

Jingyan Elaine Yuan (PhD Northwestern University) is a Professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her research focuses on how new forms of communication and technology shape various social institutions and cultural practices within a global and comparative framework. She is the author of the book *The web of meaning: The internet in a changing Chinese society* (Toronto University Press, 2021).