

Our Scholarly ‘Pivot To Asia’

Weiai Wayne Xu ¹

During the Obama administration, America made a shift in its foreign policies to re-focus on Asia. The strategy, known as ‘Pivot to Asia’, was used to contain a rising China. In this editorial note, I appropriate the geopolitical term to call for a scholarly refocus on Asia (and the broader Asia Pacific region). JCEA started as an area journal. While it has become more technology-focused and less geographically-bounded in its coverage of topics, the journal recognizes the centrality of the region’s political economy and technological forces in setting (and upsetting) global norms and rules. The Asia Pacific contains the world’s freest economies as well as the most oppressive regimes. It breeds both technology giants and laggards. As new geopolitical tensions loom, it is where the digital iron curtain is drawn, and where the vice and virtue of innovations debated. Social scientists in the English world, who lend extensively on European and American cases, can benefit from studying the Asia Pacific by testing whether and how local experience conforms to or confronts with universal theories. Very likely, western-centric norms and models become morphed and entangled in the grounded local particularity, reflecting many shades of this diverse place. In my arguments below, I highlight the Asia Pacific as a site of contradiction, as well as a site of contention and negotiation. My emphasis is that regional particularity holds the key to answer concurrent debates in the West concerning governance and accountability in the digital age.

The Asia Pacific as a Site of Contradiction

During my last trip to Korea in 2013, I yearned for visiting Songdo, which at the time was billed as the world’s “smartest city.” Little did I envision that I would find one in my home city in China. There I have seen people check in flights through facial recognition; I have walked in a public restroom where the mirrors inside project videos and tissues are dispensed after scanning human faces. I have been told that “Skynet”, China’s mass video surveillance network helped a

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of Communication, Computational Social Science Institute, University of Massachusetts-Amherst

colleague of my father's locate his missing mother with Alzheimer's. Smart, is it? But for *whom* and at what *cost*?

It is in the lived experience that *smartness* construct very different meanings in the minds of the local. At its inception, smartness allies with the use of the internet of things (IoT) devices to optimize resource distribution to create a sustainable living space (van Geenhuizen, 2016). In China, a recent smart city application called “City Brain” uses artificial intelligence and cloud computing to reduce traffic congestion. The backbone of the City Brain project is China's vast video surveillance network.

There is a thin line between a smart city and a surveillance state, between a digital utopia and dystopia. On the one end, western media marvel at the convenience of China's wallet-free living where most aspects of city life are converged into mobile apps. Digitalization pressures bureaucrats to observe public opinion (Guo, 2018) and to appear more transparent and responsive (Jia, Liu, & Shao, 2019). I recently used an e-government app to have my travel document renewed within days — this sounds mundane in the developed world but a liberating experience in a bureaucratic, post-socialist country. On the other end, AI-equipped surveillance camera across city streets spark a legitimate fear of losing privacy. Cases of using smart technologies to oppress ethnic minorities and dissents are widely reported in the media. The unchecked alliance of Big Brother and Big Profit should concern all internet scholars and observers.

I wonder what a *smart city* or *good digital governance* mean to the Chinese public? Does it mean getting efficient government services without the hassle of waiting in long queues and dealing with impatient bureaucrats? Does it mean a “safe” city ran by data to reward good behavior and punish bad actors? Or does it mean a truly *sustainable* city where data and algorithms not just reward the rich and the powerful but also protect the poor and the needy? It also begs the question of where the public draws the line between *public security* and *individual rights*, as well as between *national interests* and *community well-being*? Or are these competing values really that paradoxical to one another in the mind of the general public?

Such questions are enticing to internet scholars of this age, who are at the forefront of uncovering the dark side of technology. They have warned the world of fragmentation (Sustein, 2009), automated inequality (Eubanks, 2017), and of computational propaganda (Woolley & Howard, 2019). Likely in the coming years, we will read works on cloud-based authoritarianism or AI-powered dictatorship. We should recognize, though, that much of such critique of technologies is produced with an Eurocentric and/or US-centric perspective. In the non-western context, the scholarship either adopts a development paradigm (Arora, 2019) or follows simplistic dichotomies of state vs. people and oppression vs. resistance (Yang, 2016). Such scholarship, albeit timely and important, misses many nuances in local practices that cannot easily fit into established ways of thinking and common frames of reference.

So here is an anecdote: China's Social Credit Systems (SCSs) are controversial social engineering projects (Creemers, 2018). The controversy lies in potential (and possibly ongoing) abuse of the systems for ostracizing and punishing social outcasts, namely, ethnic minorities and political dissents. Yet, a number of China scholars and watchers have observed that the public's responses to the project is largely positive. A recent study by Kostka (2019) on the public opinion of SCSs finds that wealthier, better-educated, and urban residents in China show the strongest approval of SCSs, which complicates the common wisdom that Chinese elites are more liberal-minded and subsequently more circumspect about privacy.

Through the monolithic lens of oppression vs. resistance, we might be tempted to label the public as a basket of numb subjects in a Orwellian society. Doing such, nevertheless, will miss a bigger force at work: according to the panelists at the Asia Society of Switzerland in Zurich, the public genuinely sees the social credit system a solution to the societal problems of lacking trust and accountability — these are serious social ills blamed for, for instance, the country's poor food safety record and widespread frauds. This notion that SCSs serve as a panacea for China's social ills is further confirmed by Kostka's (2019) finding, which is based on a survey of more than 350,000 users and 17 semi-structured interviews conducted in Shanghai and Beijing.

Asia Pacific as a Site of Contention and Negotiation

My recent projects are influenced by the debate in the US and Europe concerning the rise of populism and ethnonationalism in the algorithmic age. This topic has led me down to the path of tracking heated debates on governments' and internet platforms' accountability in tackling fake news, hate speech, and foreign propaganda. I watched the theatrical grandstanding of politicians as they grilled tech executives over Russiagate and data leakage; I also listened to Kremlin technocrats justifying internet regulation for *cyber-hygiene* — At the Russian Internet Governance Forum 2019, Andrey Krutskikh, from Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said "You cannot kill cancer by washing hands." He was referring to the many ills of internet society and calling for tougher state regulations. Years ago, the thought of censoring social media posts was unimaginable to many users in liberal democracies. But now, censorship on mainstream social media sites has become such a common grievance to many ultra-conservative users that some have migrated to their own private social network (i.e., Gab) and found 'safe space' in TikTok, an app made by a Chinese technology conglomerate. Taiwan, a democratic society with unfettered internet access, proposes to block Chinese streaming sites, citing national security and propaganda concerns ahead of the election.

There is nothing new under the sun. The heat surrounding hate speech and electoral manipulation is a reminiscent of the night of July 5th, 2009, the night the access to Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube was blocked after the deadly ethnic riots in Xinjiang. The government cited foreign interference and social stability to justify the action (Griffiths, 2019). For decades, China conducts internet regulation in the name of protecting moral goodness and social orderliness (Cui

& Wu, 2016). Would the democratic world follow suit in the name of fighting hate speech and Russian interference?

What makes the Asia Pacific particularly interesting is that its internet society does not parallel but likely foretell its counterpart in the US and Europe. Take China's internet governance for example, surveillance technologies and firewalls is only part of the picture. The country's internet governance is distributed across each and every internet platform made liable for harmful speech. Over the past a few years, the chief internet regulatory agency, Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), along with its provincial units, has set up a network of websites and apps to mobilize citizen vigilantes against harmful information and fake news. This embodies an unique model of internet governance in which governments (not the civil society) step in to *nationalize* the truth. This model is backed by the ideology of cyber-sovereignty, under which digital rights protection and the growth of internet economy are interpreted through a nationalistic framework (Cui & Wu, 2016; Miao & Lei, 2016). As policy makers in the US and Europe call for platform responsibilities and government oversight, we may wonder if such call inadvertently lends support to China's paternalistic internet governance (Li, 2009).

While it will be naïve to suggest that big tech in the west will walk down the path of autocracy in internet governance, we can certainly entertain the possibility that as China exports its apps and services to international audience, it also propagates its mode of platform regulation. Here, the Asia Pacific becomes the site of contention and negotiation between two competing modes of internet: an intranet characterized by tight state control but hyper-charged internet economy and a free and open internet powered by big capital but oversight by an civil society. Before we jump to settle on which model is morally or technologically superior, we should consider two competing cases. In the first case, Australian Broadcasting Corporation reported self-censorship and concerns over surveillance as Australian politicians and media organizations rush to use Wechat to engage Chinese-speaking Australians. Here, the logics and norms of China's internet governance make inroads into a liberal democracy through the popularity of an app. We can envision such challenge to the liberal vision of internet in the coming decade as more Chinese apps (notably, TikTok) become viral in the west and countries in the global south. In the second case, a recent report attributes Chinese livestreaming apps' success in the Middle East and North Africa to censorship: socially conservative users in the Arab World welcome Chinese apps because content moderators filter out any religious, political, or lewd content. Both cases underline a need for scholars to reexamine competing values underlying our digital society, and recognize our digital society not as a singular but a multipolar one.

A Note on Universalism and Asian Exceptionalism

The many contradictions and contentions laid out previously should lead us to question our long-held ideas, norms, and assumptions. Bigger and more datasets in future research can reveal more of such contradictions. But a more satisfying solution will be making big data *small* (Welles, 2014) by focusing on local cases of outliers. This is where local particularity and scholars' local knowledge matters. And this is precisely why at JCEA we have a diverse editorial board

representing key constituencies (i.e., South Korea, Japan, Russia, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Australia, etc). On that note, I believe scholars should tread carefully between *universalism* and *localism*. Western-centric frameworks and theories are thought to value universality over particularity (Miike, 2006). Challenging the western-centric scholarship is a wave of scholars who call for an Asia-centric agenda and Asian particularity (*see* Miike, 2006). China-based scholars also advocate for the sort of “China exceptionalism” and “Chinese experience” in their indigenous research (Jia, Miao, Zhang, & Cao, 2017; Jiang, 2013). Such local emphasis is not without criticism (Li, 2016). And this is an important scholarly debate that can best be solved by studying cases in the Asia Pacific, a land of contrasts, contradictions and contentions.

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