

De-Westernizing Platform Studies: History and Logics of Chinese and U.S. Platforms

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The emergence of digital platforms has attracted considerable scholarly attention among media theorists. Yet, much of this scholarship has taken Western platforms such as Facebook, Google, Twitter, Instagram, Netflix, Uber, and so on, as exemplars. In this article, we seek to contribute to the project of de-Westernizing and reregionalizing Internet studies through an analysis of Chinese platforms. Seeking to avoid dichotomizing China and the West, we identify similarities and four overlapping areas of difference between U.S. Internet platforms and Chinese platforms that need to be accounted for as part of a project of de-Westernizing platform studies. Understanding such differences, we argue, is crucial given the hegemonic roles platforms now play in a multipolar world.

Keywords: digital platforms, de-Westernization, China, hegemony

The emergence of digital platforms has attracted considerable scholarly attention among media theorists. Much of this scholarship has taken Western platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Netflix, Uber, and so on, as exemplars. Yet, the logic of Western platform capitalism is itself imperialistic (Jin, 2013). Western platform scholarship, and indeed related understandings of Internet-based forms of capitalism, in general reflects what Jin (2013) calls the “hegemonic power of American-based platforms” such as “Google, Facebook, iPhone, and Android” (p. 145). It also reflects the hegemonic centrality of Western media theory (Sparks, 2017). As Steinberg and Li (2017) argue,

The theory of platforms has for too long been built upon generalizations from exemplars most familiar to the predominantly U.S.-based writers—Facebook and YouTube being the central platforms of note. These U.S.-based platforms are subsequently taken as models to describe a seemingly place-less intermediary of global (and universal) experiences. (p. 178)

This tendency to universalize Western platform capitalism and the ideological and cultural forces that underpin its development reflect a longstanding assumption that in the case of technological

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developments the West leads. Yet, such understandings have recently been put under pressure by the rapid development and growing presence of online platforms based in China (Alibaba, Didi, WeChat, Baidu, iQiyi, Little Red Book, and many others), India (PayTM, Flipkart), Korea (Kakaotalk), Russia (Odnoklassniki, VKontakte), France (Priceminister, Fnac), Germany, Brazil, and so on. Of these companies, Chinese companies undoubtedly pose the most significant challenge to Westernized assumptions about networked media. China is the world's largest Internet market, surpassing 900 million users in 2019 (Wan, 2020). In 2017, there were 771 million Chinese-language Internet users versus 985 million English-language users (Keane & Wu, 2018). China is the only country apart from the United States with platforms listed among the top-10 global brands (de Kloet, Poell, Guohua, & Yiu Fai, 2019; Jia & Winseck, 2018). Alibaba is the world's largest e-commerce platform. Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent have become regionally and globally visible to the extent that they have acquired a collective acronym, BAT, to challenge the vernacular hegemony of the collective acronyms that characterize Western firms such as GAFAM (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft) and FAANG (Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix, Google). The BAT companies are notable for their rapid expansion, technological innovation, global ambitions, and dominance of the Chinese platform market (Jia & Winseck, 2018), and their various platform operations form a primary basis for this study.

At the same time, the past few years have seen rapidly growing scholarly interest in Chinese platforms and their users, and in the specific cultural, regulatory, and commercial frames in which such platforms have developed (J. Y. Chen & Qiu, 2019; Chong, 2019; de Kloet et al., 2019; Fuchs, 2016a; Harwit, 2017; Keane & Chen, 2017; Keane & Fung, 2018; Keane & Yu, 2019; Leong, 2018; O'Regan & Li, 2019; Peng, 2017; Plantin & de Seta, 2019; Vodanovich, McKenna, & Cai, 2017; W. Y. Wang & Lobato, 2019; Wong & Dobson, 2019; Wu & Wall, 2019; Zhang & Zhang, 2018). Unlike Western-centric platform theory, this work does not in general universalize Chinese platforms or the cultural and entrepreneurial contexts in which they developed, but understands such platforms and their usage as a product of their specific national contexts. Much of this work also challenges the hegemonic centrality of Western media theory (Sparks, 2017). In particular, Chinese scholars have produced abundant scholarship in Chinese, focused on such things as how platforms can drive the expansion of China's ICT industries and their contribution to branding Chinese culture at an international level (L. C. Zhao, Shi, & Peng, 2012).

The growing attention paid to Chinese platforms in places such as China has occurred alongside a long-running debate on "de-Westernizing" media studies (see Alacovska & Gill, 2019; Curran & Park, 2005; Thussu, 2018b; Waisbord & Mellado, 2014; G. Wang, 2011). As Waisbord and Mellado (2014) argue, "Calls for 'de-Westernization' invite scholars to reflect upon the broad conditions of intellectual production, and propose an epistemic shift" (p. 361). As they point out, "because of their locations and historical contexts, communication research in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America confronted questions about the intellectual origins of frameworks and research questions much earlier than in the West" (p. 362). Hence, "the appeal to 'de-Westernize' knowledge is hardly a novelty in areas of the world with centuries-old history of philosophical, religious, and political traditions that preceded and diverged from conventional notions of Western science and research" (Waisbord & Mellado, 2014, p. 362; Willems, 2014). To which we add that the very concept of "de-Westernization" to an extent assumes a Western frame because it implies a corrective to Western thought, taken as dominant. Thus, to a certain extent this concept reinstates the West as central and reinscribes the Otherness of the Other. At the same time, the concept of "de-Westernization" fails to provide

a legitimated standpoint for those being "included" in the reconsidered frame of whatever field is being "de-Westernized." To "de-Westernize" is to attempt to take something out, to literally create an absence, with no acknowledgment of what or who might otherwise be recognized or included. A more appropriate approach may be to "reregionalize." As such, the project of "de-Westernization" must necessarily involve more than simply a corrective rebalancing of scholarship to include examples from the "periphery" and requires a rethinking of the Western-centric assumptions that underpin communications research. As discussed by G. M. Chen and Miike (2006), this includes interrogating foundational categories central to dominant forms of Western media scholarship such as the centrality of the individual and attendant notions such as determinism and free will, the nature of political systems, and the relationship between the individual and community, among other categories that form "the foundations of our ways of knowing" (p. 4). Similarly, Alacovska and Gill (2019) advocate an "ex-centric" approach through which scholars can decenter and, as Chakrabarty (2008) argues, "provincialize" theoretical practice so as to decenter its Western universalism. Also important here is K.-H. Chen's (2010) concept of "Asia as method," that is, using Asia as an "imaginary anchoring point" (p. xv) of scholarship, so as to challenge default intellectual perspectives.

In this article, we interrogate some of the assumptions that underpin Western platform studies through the lens of Chinese platforms. Our aim is to contribute to the project of de-Westernizing and reregionalizing Internet studies and at the same time to provide some new frameworks for understanding Chinese platforms on the basis that Chinese platforms presently provide the most prominent challenge to Western platform hegemony. In so doing, we acknowledge deep similarities between Western and Chinese platforms, given that all platforms are by definition "digital infrastructures that enable two or more groups to interact" (Srnicek, 2017, p. 43) and that use a business model based in the extraction and control of data. While noting these similarities, we nevertheless see Chinese platforms as having specific aspects to their history and development that are occluded by Western-centric approaches, and draw attention to these specificities so as to disrupt universalist accounts and expand the field of platform theory more generally. In so doing, we wish to avoid "methodological nationalism" (Wimmer & Schiller, 2003) that naturalizes the organization of the world into nation-states. Our focus on Chinese platforms is not intended to solidify the nation-state as a preordained category by uncritically mapping differences between platforms onto the category of national state (see also de Kloet et al., 2019, p. 250), but to identify locally specific historical, cultural, and technical characteristics, including cross-regional U.S.-China platform interdependencies and commonalities, that can together contribute to a particular regional media history.

With these aims in mind, we identify four overlapping areas of difference between U.S. Internet platforms and Chinese platforms that need to be accounted for as part of a project of de-Westernizing and reregionalizing platform studies. They are (1) the role of different media histories in platform development, (2) the differing hegemonic projects that underpin the development of platforms, (3) changing "center-periphery" dynamics and platform development, and (4) cultural differences in the operations of platforms and their affordances.

To identify and enumerate these differences, we first conducted a brief survey of recent platform studies literature to illustrate the problem of Westernization. We then draw on examples from relevant literature to make a case for each of the points of difference identified above. Our approach, as such, is

primarily theoretical and conceptual, and draws on media industry history, media policy studies, and theories of cultural difference, supported by examples from Chinese and U.S. platforms.

Platform Studies and Its Logics

A primary impetus for this article was the observation that seminal texts in platform theory, although otherwise highly alert to the politics of digital platforms, are Western-centric. The very term *platform* is itself Western, versus 平台 (*píngtái*). According to van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal (2018),

an online platform should be understood as a programmable digital architecture designed to organize interactions between users—not just end users but also corporate entities and public bodies. It is geared toward the systematic collection, algorithmic processing, circulation, and monetization of user data. (p. 1)

Yet, *platform*, as Gillespie (2010) argues, is a term preferred by Silicon Valley firms precisely because it enables them to strategically position themselves in a “regulatory sweet spot between legislative protections that benefit them and obligations that do not” (p. 348). In this respect, the term is culturally specific. Meanwhile, 平台 denotes a raised area such as a balcony or a stage that “invites people to gather, to act, to work, and to express opinions and ideas” (de Kloet et al., 2019, p. 252), a meaning far more open than the Anglophone sense of the word. This primacy of Western nomenclature and its undergirding assumptions in the literature, we take it, exceeds the intent of any given commentator and is hegemonic in that it tends to naturalize certain definitional understandings of what platforms are and tacitly frames understandings of platforms. To give four examples of such texts, chosen for their prominent contributions to the field of platform studies, Gillespie’s field-defining article “The Politics of ‘Platforms,’” through its focus on YouTube as a case study, tends to locate Western platforms as a normative exemplar through which, as the field developed, other platforms were evaluated. Similarly, van Dijck’s (2013) seminal *The Culture of Connectivity* undoubtedly played a foundational role in establishing platform studies. According to the book’s index, Western platforms, such as Facebook, Google, Instagram, Netflix, Yahoo, and YouTube, are mentioned in more than 100 of its just over 200 pages. Yet, there is only one mention of a Chinese platform, Baidu, which appears in a note even as Baidu is credited with 5% of the global search engine market. Similarly, Srnicek’s (2017) *Platform Capitalism* has justly established itself as a “go-to” text in platform studies, but makes scant mention of non-Western platforms. Its occasional references to platforms such as Didi and Alibaba tend to lump them into discussion of Western platforms on the basis that because they do indeed share many characteristics with Western platforms, they can be unproblematically discussed together without note of considerable regional differences between them. Likewise, van Dijck and colleagues’ (2018) *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connected World*, although exemplary in its careful analysis of the social roles of platforms, overwhelmingly focuses on Western companies, with a total of only 12 mentions of BAT companies.

These few examples, although they cannot hope to by themselves represent the field, nevertheless give an idea of the assumptions that often underpin platform studies in the West. As Fuchs (2016a) argues in a critique of the Western emphasis in social media research, such emphasis should not come as a surprise, but reflects “the power structures of the field of media and communication studies that is dominated by Western scholars” (p. 16). In singling out the above works, our aim is not to undermine the frameworks

they put in play, but to problematize the contexts in which they emerge so as to create new openings for critique that expand on rather than crudely seek to contradict their insights. Nor do we wish to elide the work of those Western-based platform studies scholars whose work does encompass non-Western platforms. Such work, we argue, makes a crucial contribution to platform studies and acts as a model for this article insofar as it provides a valuable reminder of the transnational stakes of the politics of platforms.

Characteristics of Chinese and U.S. Platforms

One object of de-Westernizing platform studies is to expose what might otherwise remain unremarked or hidden, and to canvas commonalities as well as differences, so as to understand more completely the deeply entangled dynamics of regional platform logics. For example, just as the existence of Western platforms to a large extent depends on invisibilized labor in places such as China and India, so too has Western finance played a crucial role in the development of Chinese platforms (Jia & Winseck, 2018). Meanwhile, Chinese platforms through their closeness to government play a central role in ongoing state modernization projects and efforts to promote Chinese interests abroad, and have made technical innovations that complicate the historical “copycat” image of Chinese technology companies. With these and other complexities in mind, we offer four frames through which to consider similarities, differences, and interdependencies of Chinese and Western platforms.

The Role of Different Media Histories in Platform Development

There are important historical differences in the development of Western and Chinese media. Whereas Western media systems developed as an alternative to monarchic control of information with an independence that had cohered by the 19th century into a “free press” tradition, the early history of China’s media, initially established by missionaries and colonial agents, is one of struggles through the late 19th and early 20th centuries by successive governments to establish media hegemony (Ting, 2020; Y. Zhao, 2012). The Communist victory of 1949 transformed Chinese media into the voice of the Party, with a closeness that has since defined Chinese media history. As Y. Zhao (2012) cautions, “Understanding the role of the state in the Chinese media system, however, entails us to move beyond an ‘intervention’ framework” (p. 150). Rather, the media has played a key role in state modernization projects. As Y. Zhao argues, “For the Chinese as well as for many other peoples outside the core of Western capitalism, the struggle for the establishment of a modern nation-state is a historical accomplishment” (p. 150). Whereas “the older authoritarian system limited what the media could do negatively” (p. 151), the role of China’s media has been to act as a positive force in this development, whereby the Chinese Communist Party “is actively using the media to shape the contours of Chinese modernity through its control of the media” (p. 152).

This intertwining of state and market priorities is enacted in the plethora of regulatory bodies, interventionist policies, compliance regimes, loan schemes, tax incentives, and censorship measures that helps steer the development of Chinese media (W. Y. Wang & Lobato, 2019). This includes direct intervention whereby “contrary to regulatory agencies in the Liberal model, which typically operate at arm’s length from the government, China’s media regulators are government departments subject to [Chinese Communist Party] propaganda department directives” (Y. Zhao, 2012, p. 154). In response to these measures, it is routine for large Chinese media companies to have a government affairs department (de Kloet et al., 2019).

This intertwining of priorities can be seen in the prominence given media in the 13th Five-Year Plan of 2016, which prioritized ICTs as the basis for future Chinese prosperity (Hong, 2017), and in the closeness of ICT industry leaders to government, such as Pony Ma (CEO of Tencent) and Robin Li (CEO of Baidu), both members of China's National People's Congress, China's highest governing body. The dual role of such figures illustrates the dualism of Chinese platform development more generally, where capitalist entrepreneurship is entwined with government priorities in a "technonationalist" assemblage of state and market interests intended to serve "both the business ambitions of Internet companies and the infrastructural ambitions of the Chinese authorities" (Plantin & de Seta, 2019, p. 259).

In practice, this approach involves a continuous and complex dance between media and the state, where, as markets evolve, limits are set and tested in response to state priorities. This can be seen, for example, in the highly politicized development history of the Chinese live-streaming industry (Cunningham, Craig, & Lv, 2019) and in the "bumpy road" of the development of China's over-the-top streaming services (E. J. Zhao, 2017).

These historical specificities, we argue, need to be canvassed in accounts of platform logic. Although Chinese and Western platforms rely on a business model based in harvesting user data (Srnicek, 2017), Chinese platforms are nevertheless a product of the specific market and infrastructure contexts in which they emerged. As O'Regan and Li (2019) write,

China's platforms were developed for its own market context characterized initially by significant regionalization, infrastructural deficits, an underdeveloped bricks and mortar retail sector and poorly developed logistics and supply chains coupled with a less developed personal computing and laptop penetration and lower levels of discretionary income than in the West. This paved the way for the more rapid and extensive uptake of smartphone-based services in China than in Western countries. (p. 72)

Mobile services were hence able to "leapfrog" PCs as the primary interface for platforms, which in turn meant that companies such as Tencent and Alibaba had to adopt innovative strategies to achieve growth. O'Regan and Li (2019) contrast Alibaba with Amazon:

While Alibaba is often seen as China's Amazon, Alibaba grew out of a different logic and set of commitments to small- and medium-sized businesses as well as large businesses which it coupled with an Amazon like attention to the three elements of logistics, finance and e-commerce. Alibaba was making a market where there was none, whereas Amazon was cannibalizing already-established national markets and building its network on top of pre-existing national supply chains. (p. 77)

This emphasis on mobile technology has resulted in technological innovations that complicate the image of Chinese technology as simply copying the West. These include the corporatization of shanzhai practices based in copying, but also improving pirated technology, famously fostered in the tech bazaars of Shenzhen, and that take a radically open-source approach to development that is in contrast to proprietary approaches to technological development and pay little heed to notions of originality (Han, 2017). For example,

E. J. Zhao (2019) explains how smartphone-maker Xiaomi developed its Android-based MIUI operating system through a highly accelerated, collaborative, peer-to-peer process to some extent based in the "shanzhai ethos of decentralized innovation through sharing, rapid prototyping and iterative design" (p. 34).

Another example of the impact of specific media industry histories on platform development can be seen in the ascendancy of WeChat, China's most popular social media platform. Launched in 2011 by Tencent as a mobile chat app similar to WhatsApp, founded two years earlier, WeChat rapidly built market share in a mobile-centric environment in which Western social media apps such as Facebook and Twitter are blocked, and now has more than 1 billion active monthly users in China (Plantin & de Seta, 2019). Although companies such as Apple and Facebook have belatedly launched add-ons such as payment systems, Western platform development has mostly been siloed. WeChat, by contrast, combines social media, e-commerce, payments systems, video calling, news and weather, food delivery, and medical appointment booking, among other services, into a self-contained ecosystem. Through its open-platform architecture, WeChat also operates as a host for more than 1 million available third-party "miniprograms" that operate within the platform (Ren & Cao, 2020). These hosts offer services such as traffic condition notifications (Mobai), tourism bookings (Yilong Travel), event ticketing (Douban), entertainment (cat-eye movies), or payment (Alipay), without leaving the main application. Through its alliances with miniprogram providers, including with rivals such as Alibaba, WeChat was able to pursue an extremely rapid development cycle and make innovations in data sharing that enhanced its business model. Miniprograms are able to access users' WeChat information and have quickly built their own databases, while the new data they generate, such as user sharing or referrals, flow back to the core platform, expanding WeChat's penetration in related fields. Via this process, the establishment of departmental platforms, the core platform is able to deepen its penetration of all areas of society.

This contrasts with Facebook's belated attempts to combine multiple functions, which are hampered because people use Facebook-owned platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook in very different ways (Dudarenok, 2019), and because the regulatory regimes in which Facebook operates, such as digital payment regulations and privacy laws, vary from region to region.

The Differing Hegemonic Projects That Underpin the Development of Platforms

Platforms, we take it, are hegemonic. They inevitably play a role in the projection and naturalization of power and ideology that includes internal and regional priorities and nationalist expansion projects. Following from the different media histories of China and the United States outlined above, platforms have developed in very different ideological contexts and have different ideological projects. The differences between the Chinese and U.S. approaches, however, are obscured by universalist accounts that position Western platform capitalism as an expression of universalized neoliberal market logics.

Platforms such as Facebook and Google, as Srnicek (2017) argues, are ideologically linked to the growth of neoliberal market society, as expressed in the portmanteau term *platform capitalism*. This linking of free market ideology and networked digital media is consistent with earlier critiques of the "California ideology" (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996) and "communicative capitalism" (Dean, 2005) that explain how U.S. ICTs developed in the context of waves of neoliberal deregulation, privatization, and hype that linked

markets, democracy, and digital technology. Even as such accounts themselves assume a certain universality insofar as they tend to overlook the development of ICTs beyond the West, they nevertheless offer a valuable critique of how Western ICTs, with their promises of participation, freedom of expression, "frictionless commerce," and free exchange of knowledge, have functioned as emissaries of a universalized neoliberal capitalism. U.S. platforms, as Jin (2013) argues, are part of a history of imperialism that most recently progressed from "information imperialism" to "platform imperialism," such that "the U.S., which had previously controlled non-Western countries with its military power, capital, and later cultural products, now seems to dominate the world with platforms, benefitting from these platforms, mainly in terms of capital accumulation" (p. 145).

The contexts in which U.S. platform imperialism developed are quite different from those of Chinese platform hegemony. As Srnicek (2017) argues, U.S. platform capitalism developed in response to a "long downturn" (pp. 9–35) in the economic fortunes of the West and an associated crisis of capital accumulation. In the search for new markets, capitalism, via the mechanism of the digital platform, adapted itself to a digital surveillance model focused on the accumulation of value through the appropriation and commodification of user data. Central to this is the ideology of technological disruption (Christensen, 1997) that, as Castells (2000) argues, functions as an analogue for a Schumpeterian ideology of "creative destruction" whereby the ways of life and economic security of the many are sacrificed for the enrichment of the few, an ideology encapsulated in the Silicon Valley catchphrase "move fast and break things" (p. 215).

Chinese platforms, by contrast, have since the late 1990s (when Alibaba and Tencent were founded; Baidu followed in 2000), developed in the context of a long upturn in China's economic fortunes and have only relatively recently been identified as a possible antidote to flattening economic growth (Hong, 2017). Like all platforms, Chinese platforms are hegemonic, but through their closely coupled role to the state, play a multifaceted role as remakers of the economy, in government strategies to ensure social stability, and as a means for China's expansion strategies. That is, just as China's "neoliberal turn" following "opening up" in the late 1970s closely involved the state in the development of markets, so platforms have been positioned not as an expression of free market ideology so much as pillars in state marketization projects, enabling such things as the reorganization of labor (J. Y. Chen, 2020; Hong, 2017; Y. Zhao, 2008). These projects are closely coupled with hegemonic expansion projects. Whereas, from the point of view of hegemony, Western platforms developed as a technolibertarian response to a crisis of capital accumulation, Chinese platforms, with their twinning of entrepreneurial and state imperatives, developed as a "technonationalist" (Plantin & de Seta, 2019) response to a perception that China suffers an undeservedly low international status and should take a central place on the world stage. The former are encoded with an imperative for disruptive instability and the latter with an imperative for stability to directly support China's ambitions as a global power.

Chinese platforms play an important role in China's "going out" strategy as part of the "China dream" of establishing itself as a central world power. Anxieties about the influence of Western media, culture, and liberal ideology; the success of South Korean pop culture; and a "cultural trade deficit" whereby China lacked cultural exports and influence underpinned the "going global strategy" introduced in 2001 and the "going out" strategy, formulated in 2002–2005 and articulated by President Hu Jintao at the Seventeenth

National Party conference in 2007 as part of a new emphasis on “soft power” (Keane & Wu, 2018). As Keane and Wu (2018) argue,

“Going out” embodies at least three levels. The first refers to the going out of China’s products (i.e., media products and services); the second level is transmitting ideology; and the third level is Chinese organizations, people, and delegations (investment, study, travel). For the government, the second of these objectives—ideology—is the most important. For the digital companies, the goals are mostly economic. . . . (p. 52)

The “going out” strategy has since the ascension of President Xi Jinping become associated with the “China Dream,” which Xi has expressed in terms of a “great rejuvenation” of the Chinese nation set to define its “modern history” (as cited in Z. Wang, 2014, p. 1). This can be seen in the Belt and Road policy (formerly One Belt One Road), a massive infrastructure project, including ICT infrastructure and the construction of a “digital Silk Road,” potentially costing \$1 trillion and spanning 60 countries that has “increasingly become the defining policy of China’s relationship with the global political economy” (Shen, 2018, p. 2863).

China’s digital platforms, in this context, play an explicit role in attempts to promote Chinese culture and ideology abroad that is fundamentally different from that played by Western platforms. Although China’s considerable efforts to advance its “discourse power” in the West have yielded poor results (Xiao Yang, 2018), China continues to make enormous efforts to protect its interests abroad. By 2015, the BAT companies were among the top-10 Internet companies by market capitalization (Jia & Winseck, 2018, p. 35), and they have made considerable investments in Internet companies in places such as Brazil, Canada, Egypt, India, Israel, Japan, Russia, the United States, South Korea, and Thailand (Jia & Winseck, 2018, p. 51). China has also moved to play a central role in Internet development, for example, in hosting the annual world Internet conference, which “challenges the centrality of the Western digital empire” (Keane & Yu, 2019, p. 4633). Keane and Yu (2019) cite Alibaba’s move into content creation with its purchase in 2016 of the *South China Morning Post* and subsequent establishment of a U.S. bureau as an example of a move in “alignment with Xi’s vision, and its stated ambition to expand China’s voice on the global platform” (p. 4630). As they argue, “By getting more and more people to use platforms or services that are owned, controlled, serviced, or invested by Chinese companies, these companies have become part of the Chinese digital empire-building project” (p. 4635).

The success of TikTok, the first Chinese platform to achieve significant market success outside China, illustrates the complex priorities of China’s soft power. Although the platform has sought to distance itself from the Chinese state in its public statements, it exercises hegemony in ways that obviate “soft power” nation branding or the dissemination of ideology. TikTok gathers considerable data from its users, using facial biorecognition and other AI technologies, and has a close relationship to the state, which has included censoring content deemed politically sensitive in China. In part because of anxieties about its data-gathering practices, its use is banned by U.S. and Australian military forces and the platform has been subject to moves to ban it altogether in the United States (Ryan, 2020; Tobin, 2020).

Chinese platform hegemony is not only outward facing. Just as Western platforms project the hegemony of free markets, deregulation, disruption, and labor flexibility internationally and domestically,

so Chinese platforms play a role in projecting and directly managing market and state power in the domestic context.

Chinese and U.S. platforms in general base their business models on data surveillance, but in the latter case their relationship with the state is largely obscured. For example, companies such as Alphabet (owner of Google and YouTube) and Amazon provide services to state security and law enforcement agencies, but tend not to publicize this aspect of their operations (Konkel, 2014; Levine, 2018; Schuppe, 2019). Chinese platforms have a more direct relationship with state security and surveillance apparatus. This includes government mandates to monitor social media conversations and to censor content related to sensitive political matters or that includes the names of dissidents, which are allied with mechanisms that allow platforms to easily identify users. WeChat's sign-up process, for example, unlike Western platforms, requires a valid phone number, which enables WeChat to verify the users' identity, access their contacts list, and potentially connect their online activity to other activity (Harwit, 2017).

Another example of convergence between platform and hegemonic state interests is creditworthiness-ranking systems such as the Sesame Credit System, developed by Alibaba subsidiary Ant Financial in response to a government call for companies to establish a credit-scoring system. Sesame Credit gamifies consumption by allocating its users a score based on indicators such as the quality of a user's social network and gives rewards and punishments based on compliance with approved forms of behavior. The system is regarded as a pilot project for the Chinese government's social credit system, due to be fully operational in 2020, which will provide a citizenship score for all Chinese nationals (Wong & Dobson, 2019).

The integration between state ideological priorities and platforms can also be seen in the Xuexi Qiangguo (Know Your Strong Country) app launched in January 2019. Developed in conjunction with Alibaba, the app features news about the Party and President Xi Jinping and awards users a personal score for their engagement. Integrated with Alipay, the app is compulsory for Party members and some workplaces and schools require staff and students to achieve high scores (de Kloet et al., 2019).

Together, such developments have contributed to what has been described as "networked authoritarianism" (MacKinnon, 2011; Tsai, 2016), whereby the Chinese government has closely integrated online media into its discursive strategies and management of the Chinese people.

Changing "Center-Periphery" Dynamics and Platform Development

By changing center-periphery dynamics, we refer to the changing economic and technological power dynamics between China and the West and the role platform development has played in this transformation. Historically, companies such as Apple have long been dependent on large pools of surplus Chinese labor who work in near slave conditions in factories across Southeast China (J. L. Qiu, 2019), who are being displaced by robots (Chan, 2017). These conditions of labor exploitation have functioned as a form of imperialism (Fuchs, 2016b). At the same time, China has long been regarded as a "copycat" nation in terms of its use of Western IP. This dynamic is now changing. Thussu (2018a) uses the term *Sino-globalization* to describe China's state-managed model of globalization, deployed as the West turns inward and "degloblizes" (p. 27). Thussu writes,

"The accelerated globalization of China's media is coinciding with shifts in international geopolitical and economic power relations, in what has been termed variously as a 'post-American' and a 'post-Western' world" (p. 17).

As Fuchs (2016b) shows, between 2004 and 2014 the assets, revenues, and profits of Chinese multinationals "dramatically increased" such that "European and North American multinational corporations now no longer control around three-quarters, but instead two-thirds of global capital," which he understands as the emergence of "capitalism with Chinese characteristics" (p. 19).

This changing global economic, innovation, and infrastructure dynamic, including the emergence of what Thussu (2018b) describes as a "new global communication order," requires new understandings of the role played by Chinese platforms and the frames of reference within which they are considered, not least the possibility that traditional Western assumptions have been flipped and that China is now a leading technological power commensurate with its expansionist ambitions (Thussu, de Burgh, & Shi, 2018).

An example of this technological innovation is WeChat, once understood in the West as an imitator of WhatsApp and now surpasses the functionality of Silicon Valley platforms. WeChat's owner, Tencent, along with Baidu, Huawei, and Alibaba, is among the world's "smartest" 50 technology companies as listed by MIT Technology Review (Thussu, 2018b). In 2016, the company hosted more than half of Chinese Internet usage on its platforms and established its own AI research laboratory with the slogan of "make AI everywhere" (Marr, 2018, para. 2). The purchase by China in 2016 of the world's most powerful supercomputer, the Sunway Taihu Light, further signals the changing dynamics by which China seeks to play a pivotal role as a high-tech innovator in its own right.

These technological advances are consistent with China's growing infrastructure power as expressed in its Belt and Road initiative and its digital Silk Road counterpart. This includes initiatives such as the Alibaba-sponsored "electronic World Trade Platform" (eWTP), which Vila Seoane (2020) describes as "a clear and bold initiative to shape global trade that expresses the growing influence of Chinese Internet firms" (p. 2), and which involves joint projects with countries such as Rwanda, Belgium, and Malaysia. For example, Alibaba has aligned its Alibaba Cloud data center building program with the Belt and Road initiative and announced in April 2016 that in the previous fiscal year it had expanded operations 400% (Shen, 2018, p. 2689). In 2018, Alibaba Cloud was ranked fifth in the world for cloud services and had built data centers in Australia, Dubai, Germany, Japan, and the United States (Thussu, 2018a, p. 27).

Similarly, China has taken a lead in establishing 3G, 4G, and 5G networks and China-owned technical standards, such as the 4G/5G TD-LTE standard (Hong, 2017), and has built the world's largest 5G network that it has made available to private operators at lower cost than Western countries to facilitate development of technologies such as autonomous vehicles, factory automation, and robotics. Telephony companies such as Huawei and ZTE have taken a lead in 5G-related patents, and China plans to offer low-priced 5G infrastructure in the Middle East, parts of Africa, and Eurasia as part of its Belt and Road initiative (Lee, 2019). Huawei has been at the forefront of the program, including its involvement in projects such as the Pakistan-China fiber-optic cable project launched in 2016, which will ultimately extend to Europe (Shen, 2018, p. 2692).

The global ambitions of Chinese ICT firms can also be seen in investments by Xiaomi in more than 50 start-ups around the globe and in its investment, in 2016, of US\$25 million in Indian Internet company Hungama Digital. By 2016, almost half the Indian smartphone market was held by Chinese companies such as Xiaomi, Lenovo, Vivo, and Oppo.

Cultural Differences in the Operations of Platforms and Their Affordances

Platforms are expressions and creators of their regional cultures, which are embedded in their affordances and reflected in the ways that users interact with them (Chu & Choi, 2010). This includes fundamental issues of cultural difference that impact the design and use of platforms (Vodanovich et al., 2017). For example, as L. Qiu, Lin, and Leung (2013) have found, despite similarities between the social networking sites Renren and Facebook, users use them quite differently. Renren culture is understood as more collectivist among bicultural individuals who use both. Others have highlighted cultural differences in such things as the willingness to engage complex interfaces (Cheng & Nielsen, 2016) and differences in reading patterns (Dong & Lee, 2008).

Chen, in conversation with Miike (G. M. Chen & Miike, 2006), identifies 10 culturally distinctive characteristics of Chinese communication behavior: *bao* (reciprocity), *mientze* [*mianzi*] (face), *guanxi* (interrelation), *he xie* (harmony), *li* (rites), *keqi* (politeness), *feng shui* (spatial arrangement), *qi* (vital energy), *guan* (destined relations), and *zhang bu* (divination). Of these, the most widely noted in the scholarship is the role of *guanxi*. *Guanxi* is a term that literally describes "personal connection" accrued as a result of long-term interpersonal relationships (Qi, 2017, pp. 111–112). *Guanxi* carries with it a sense of obligation as well as use value (Barbalet, 2015), and is "a key cultural factor that determines Chinese interpersonal behavior," given that it "helps to achieve positive group dynamics and strengthen social ties" (Vodanovich et al., 2017, p. 629). As a form of social capital that its users often accumulate "with the intention of converting it into economic, political, or symbolic capital" (Gold, Guthrie, & Wank, 2002, p. 7), *guanxi* exchanges, as Barbalet (2015) argues, "never occur as isolated events, they are serially connected and configured in a network pattern" (p. 1040).

As Wu and Wall (2019) show, this network metaphor carries over to social media. They demonstrate how contentious political talk on WeChat is structured not by a logic of social tie strength but according to *guanxi*, which, because of its connections to reputation (Barbalet, 2015), tends to inhibit contentious discussion. Similarly, *guanxi* played a key role in WeChat's early rapid development, with its 2103 launch of "virtual red packet," a function that enabled users to exchange traditional "red packets" during Spring Festival, which required users to link their bank account to their profile and rapidly accelerated WeChat's e-commerce capacity (Yang, Sun, & Lee, 2016).

Another example of cultural specificity is the tolerance for surveillance-based ranking systems exhibited by Chinese platform users. Western platforms have long used ranking systems (e.g., Uber's customer and driver ranking system), but these are in general unconnected to the state. Platforms such as Sesame Credit, developed in cooperation with the state (Wong & Dobson, 2019), gather an enormous amount of personal data, yet nevertheless enjoy an overall level of support of 80% and, as Kostka (2019) has found, find their highest levels of support among younger, affluent, highly educated users who might

otherwise be expected to express individualist, public sphere concerns about infringements on political freedom and individual rights. As Chong (2019) observes, in China concerns about data surveillance

are often superseded by celebratory discourses about convenience, creativity/innovation, cost-effectiveness, efficiency, and, above all, security. The latter discourse often draws its discursive power from the collective aspiration for "the good life," which can be historically traced to China's modernization project. (p. 4)

Conclusion

Platforms play a crucial role in a multipolar world, as facilitators of sociality and exchange and as hegemonic vehicles that project national ambitions, and accordingly have become a central focus of analysis for media scholars. What remains is to dehomogenize platform studies so that regional differences are untangled from wider commonalities. As the platform business model becomes more dominant, integrating formerly stand-alone devices into the communicative "Internet of things," such that corporations from appliance manufacturers to vehicle manufacturers reimagine themselves as communicative intermediaries within networked digital infrastructures, so regional differences and similarities will become more visible as objects for study. In the case of Chinese digital media corporations, these differences and similarities have already attracted considerable scholarly attention. For example, ride-sharing platforms such as Didi and Uber rely on the exploitation of a precarious surplus labor force, yet do so within quite different ideological, regulatory, cultural, and social contexts that impact their operations (J. Y. Chen, 2020; J. Y. Chen & Qiu, 2019). Chinese platforms and in particular the BAT companies are heavily implicated in the circuits of global capitalism and financialization (Jia & Winseck, 2018), yet have become among China's largest and most dominant companies, central to national renewal and expansion projects (Hong, 2017).

What remains clear, then, is that regional platform histories and logics are not interchangeable. As Goody (2010) argues, globalization "is no longer exclusively Western" (p. 125). It is the task of scholars, then, to open up and reregionalize platform studies so as to address the question of what different historical, state and cultural imperatives drive the platforms in their different cultural contexts, and from this to address the increasingly pressing question of what diverse hegemonic roles platforms play, now, in a multipolar world.

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