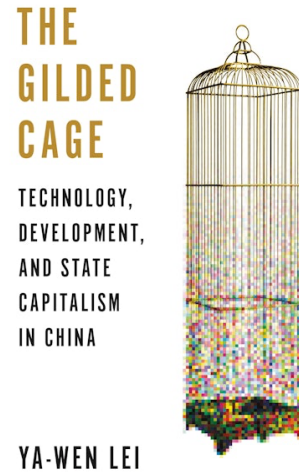


Ya-Wen Lei, **The Gilded Cage: Technology, Development, and State Capitalism in China**, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023, 416 pp., \$120.00 (hardcover), \$35.00 (paperback).

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In ***The Gilded Cage: Technology, Development, and State Capitalism in China***, Professor Ya-Wen Lei explores China’s techno-developmental regime and state capitalism within the context of its economic strategy of “emptying the cage to change the birds” (p. 67). Since the early 21st century, China’s economic development model has undergone a profound structural transformation. Within a single decade, state-led industrial policy redefined labor-intensive, export-oriented manufacturing as a traditional sector to be phased out, while tech giants, built on the Internet and digital technologies, rapidly emerged as the new core of industrial development. Within this process, it becomes crucial to investigate how legal and institutional instruments are employed to advance a compressed technological revolution, as well as how different types of labor roles cope with and view the resulting shifts in the manufacturing industry.



Arguing that existing theories of the developmental state and digital capitalism are inadequate for capturing the specificities of China’s developing trajectory, Lei introduces the concept of the *techno-developmental regime*. This framework is proposed to facilitate a more holistic analysis of the “state and nonstate actors, institutions, ideas, cultural norms, forms of materiality, and practices” that collectively shape technological and economic advancement (p. 10).

In chapter 2, the analysis focuses on the empirically grounded examination of China’s economic development, tracing the contexts underpinning its techno-development and the historical evolution of its techno-developmentalism ideology. Following the 1978 reform and opening-up, China’s economy was initially propelled by an abundance of cheap labor. By the late 20th century, local governments began leveraging land-based finance to fuel expansion. However, the finitude of land resources compelled coastal cities to seek more sustainable pathways, leading them to pioneer technology-driven economic models. Lei demonstrates that this strategic pivot is deeply rooted in a long-standing national emphasis on technological progress. While interpretations of techno-developmentalism varied among leaders across different eras, a consistent consensus on the critical importance of technology for national development has persisted.

Chapter 3 dissects the operational logic of China’s techno-developmental regime. It traces how Guangdong’s bold “emptying the cage to change the birds” strategy, which emerged after the 2008 financial crisis, was elevated from a provincial experiment to a national strategy under Xi’s leadership post-2012. In addition, the advance of technology-driven economic development precipitated a parallel

scientization of state governance, which allowed administrative and assessment policies to align with and accelerate this new economic mode.

Chapter 4 addresses the fate of the “old birds”: the traditional labor-intensive industries. It shows how local authorities, seeking to expedite industrial upgrading to “replacing the bird,” have repurposed regulations like spanning environmental protection, building codes, and fire safety to displace firms classified as “outdated” (p. 77). The chapter investigates the survival strategies and the dynamic interactions between these outdated firms, their workers, and local bureaucrats within a production landscape undergoing rapid technological change.

Faced with the tide of techno-development, traditional industries are not passively awaiting their demise. Chapter 5 explores one of the strategies for their transformation: robotization, which means “replacing humans with robots” (p. 140). The analysis covers the diverse reactions of government, firms, workers, and technicians to this trend. Workers’ perceptions are not uniform but are shaped by factors such as identity and life cycle stage. For example, low-skilled workers in different age groups hold divergent views on how the robotization influenced their previous work. This variation is attributed to their differing life pressures and perceived vulnerability to displacement.

Beginning in chapter 6, the analysis pivots to the “new bird,” big tech companies. The state initially fostered their growth through a policy of strategic ambiguity, which provided the regulatory space for rapid expansion. The rise of these tech giants created vast new industries, offering economic benefits but also posing complex governance dilemmas. However, the state has also leveraged these firms, engaging in collaborations on big data and digital platforms to modernize its own administrative capabilities.

The next two chapters adopt a micro-perspective, analyzing the digital economy through its workforce: food delivery couriers and software engineers. Chapter 7 investigates the transition of workers from traditional factories to the digital economy, comparing service platform and gig platform. It points out that while technology offers a semblance of freedom, it also imposes new forms of algorithmic control, even prompting some workers to organize collectively in resistance. Chapter 8 examines the “coding elite”—software engineers—noting their diverse class backgrounds. Despite their crucial role in the digital company, they face intense competition and exploitative labor practices, including illegally long work hours. Based on their class origins, engineers adopt varied coping strategies, which the author categorizes into four types: optimalists, strivers, minimalists, and the disillusioned.

Chapter 9 returns to the relationship between the state and big techs. The very power tech giants wielded to transcend traditional boundaries eventually triggered state vigilance, compelling the reshaping of the cage. Lei focuses on the ensuing regulatory crackdown, where the state reasserted its authority through antitrust enforcement, financial risk management, data governance, and algorithmic oversight. However, state intervention in labor issues was comparatively tentative and ambiguous. These measures not only constrain tech giants but also reconfigure China’s techno-state capitalism.

For decades, China's economy has pursued a strategy of "emptying the cage to change the birds," a process that has seen labor-intensive manufacturing fade in favor of new industries reliant on digital technologies. However, regardless of such technological and economic development, these new industries remain confined within the "cage" of the state's instrumental power. The technology itself has even become a tool that reinforces mechanisms of management and control. The primary strength of *The Gilded Cage* lies in its thorough analysis of the state's role within the ecosystem of technology and digital capital. Lei examines China's unique model of techno-state capitalism, where, unlike in democratic systems, the authoritarian state acts as an important force. From initial support and intervention to subsequent performance evaluation, resource allocation, and administration of rewards and penalties, the government participates in the entire technological development process. This analysis provides a vital perspective for critical media studies by contending that inquiry into media technology development must not be limited to the dynamics of technological capitalism and its influence on individuals and communities. Rather, a comprehensive analysis requires integrating the role of state to fully apprehend the political and institutional structures that underpin the capitalism.

Adopting a "techno-developmental regime" as its framework, this book synthesizes a macro-level analysis of formative political, institutional, ideological, and cultural forces with a micro-perspective that examines the lives of ordinary individuals amid macro-level societal transformation. Through in-depth interviews and fieldwork, Lei investigates various roles, including low-skilled manufacturing workers, local government officials, platform delivery couriers, and software engineers at big techs. The observation focuses on their life choices and circumstances in an era of rapid change, particularly how they navigate the evolving institutional and technological tools that govern their work and lives. The interwoven macro-micro approach thus offers a richer understanding of social complexity. For instance, while existing studies have examined the labor issues of delivery couriers and their tensions with platforms, few situate these struggles within the broader context of China's national technological transformation and economic development. In Lei's research, part of the delivery riders are former factory workers who have migrated from labor-intensive industries to digital platforms economy. Attracted by the perceived freedom and flexibility of platform work, they want to accumulate capital for their own entrepreneurship. However, this autonomy is largely illusory. Platform companies have developed comprehensive control systems that leverage data, technology, and legal mechanisms to compel couriers to work relentlessly. This pressure can be so intense that riders are sometimes forced to flout government regulations simply to avoid breaching platform rules. Viewed through the broader lens of China's techno-development, these platform companies represent the government's championed "new birds," which have pioneered industries and employment models that have outpaced the development of adequate oversight, operating within a permissive and often ambiguous regulatory environment. This regulatory gap, Lei argues, is the root cause of the emerging conflicts.

Beyond its integration of macro and micro dimensions, another strength of this book lies in its comparative analysis. In chapter 2, Lei uses data from the World Value Survey, situating Chinese attitudes toward technology within a global context and demonstrating that the populace mirrors the state's official enthusiasm for techno-development. Chapter 3 contrasts China, Taiwan, and South Korea. Despite their shared origins in authoritarianism, these cases reveal how different processes of democratization profoundly shape technology's role in social transformation. Chapter 6 further extends this comparison to

include the United States, examining how varying degrees of state intervention in technological advancement produce divergent outcomes. As Lei notes, the concept “techno-developmental regime” is designed to contribute to the cross-contextual analysis, and these comparisons can be both spatial and temporal. With the rise of generative AI, for instance, productive forces are evolving once again, creating a new generation of “new birds.” Future scholars can apply this framework to analyze emerging technological contexts, examining the role of technology in social transformation across different historical periods and uncovering the underlying logics that drive these changes.