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Jian Lin, Wilfred Yang Wang, and Ping Sun, **Chinese Platforms: A Critical Introduction,** Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2025, 192 pp., $24.95 (paperback).[1]

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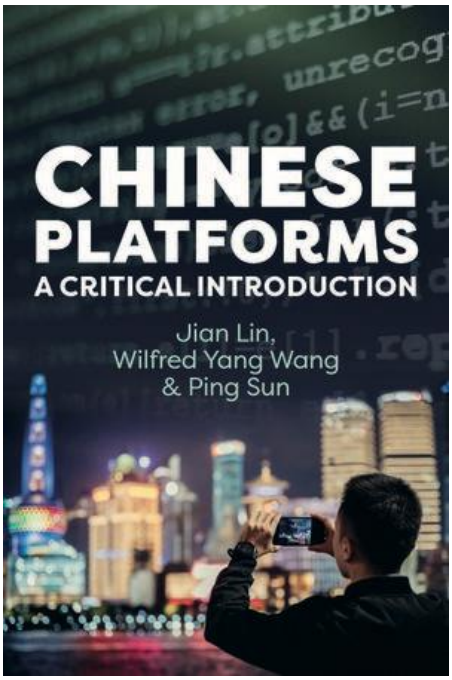

Platform studies in English have often approached China through two familiar frames: as a late imitator of Silicon Valley or as an authoritarian exception to an otherwise liberal digital order. ***Chinese Platforms: A Critical Introduction*** rejects this binary. Jian Lin, Wilfred Yang Wang, and Ping Sun present Chinese platforms as historically specific formations produced through interactions among state policy, capital, infrastructure, labor, and culture, yet deeply involved in global digital development. Its central achievement is not merely to add Chinese examples to an established field but to show how studying China can redraw the conceptual geography of platform studies.

The book develops this claim through three themes—culture, globalization, and governance—grounding each in chapters on platform labor, e-commerce, social media entertainment, and overseas expansion. Throughout, platforms appear not as neutral technologies but as infrastructures that organize economic exchange, cultural visibility, and everyday communication. Interfaces and recommendation systems matter, but their effects depend on political institutions, industrial strategies, and users' practices. The authors frame this outward-facing process as the global diffusion of platform logics developed in China, a process that shifts attention from how China entered a platform economy designed elsewhere to how Chinese firms, business models, and user cultures now help constitute that economy.

Chapters 1 and 2 establish the book's historical and political framework. Through the international growth of Huawei and ByteDance, chapter 1 reverses accounts that treat global platform power as a one-way movement from the United States (Jin, 2015). Chinese firms emerge as active makers of transnational digital infrastructure. Chapter 2 complements this analysis by distinguishing governance by platforms from governance of platforms. Chinese platform development combines sovereignty-oriented platform nationalism with development-oriented techno-solutionism: Political speech and data flows are closely controlled, even as platforms receive support as engines of innovation and growth. The authors' phrase "schizophrenic governance" effectively names this simultaneous promotion and discipline.

The sectoral chapters give this framework material depth. Chapter 3 examines food delivery and ride-hailing, where algorithms allocate orders, calculate routes, impose deadlines, and convert managerial

[1] AI use disclosure: Generative AI was used solely for English grammar correction.

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choices into apparently objective technical decisions. For migrants with insecure residency and limited social protection, algorithmic pressure intensifies an already unequal labor market. Yet the chapter does not reduce workers to passive victims. Drawing on research into delivery labor, it shows how riders and drivers share knowledge, work around platform rules, and sometimes organize resistance (Sun, 2019). An SBS Mandarin interview with Lin and Wang extends this argument: Low entry barriers and rapid payment make platform work attractive during economic uncertainty, but these advantages coexist with unstable earnings and limited long-term protection (Chen, 2026).

Chapters 4 and 5 turn from service work to commerce and cultural production. The discussion of Taobao, Douyin, and Kuaishou shows that e-commerce depends on more than innovative apps. Local government support, manufacturing clusters, payment systems, logistics networks, and inexpensive labor together make livestream commerce possible. Temu and Shein consequently appear less as isolated global successes than as extensions of a domestic platform ecology. Chapter 5 traces a parallel transformation in the wanghong economy, from early cultures of parody, lip-synching, piracy, and activism to the professionalized creator industries of Douyin, Xiaohongshu, and Bilibili. By showing how routines, tastes, and emotions become monetizable, the chapter places creators alongside riders, drivers, and merchants rather than separating creative and gig labor (Craig et al., 2021).

Chapter 6 follows Chinese platforms into the United States and Australia. Its attention to diasporic communication and everyday sociality prevents overseas expansion from being reduced to controversies over TikTok, Huawei, or WeChat. The conclusion draws these processes together through the metaphor of a "parallel universe": Chinese and Western platform systems remain institutionally distinct, yet they are entangled through capital, technology, data, labor, and regulation. A later conversation with the authors further develops this argument by emphasizing the coexistence of multiple platform ecosystems and pragmatic adaptation to divergent regulatory regimes rather than complete separation (Cheng et al., 2026). The Chinese case thus appears less an anomaly than a lens on the growing entanglement of states and corporations elsewhere.

The book's broader value lies in joining de-Westernization to empirical analysis. It builds on work about the platformization of Chinese society (de Kloet et al., 2019) while advancing the longer project of rethinking media studies beyond Western universalism (Curran & Park, 2000). It also complements *Platforms and Cultural Production* (Poell et al., 2022) and the *International Journal of Cultural Studies* special issue on global perspectives on platforms and cultural production (Poell et al., 2025). These comparisons clarify its contribution: It does not simply call for a more geographically inclusive field but shows how governance, infrastructure, labor, and culture must be rethought when several platform ecosystems coexist, overlap, and compete.

This strength also reveals the book's most productive limitation. Sun's (2024) account of platform research in terms of concepts, ecologies, and public value offers a useful standard of assessment. *Chinese Platforms* is especially strong at the first two levels. It provides a portable vocabulary and treats platforms as ecologies involving regulators, firms, workers, users, infrastructures, and cultural forms. However, its normative implications remain less fully developed. The book identifies labor exploitation, privacy risks, and geopolitical conflict but says less about the institutions through which a multipolar platform order might

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become publicly accountable. If platform power is relational and ecologically embedded, the next question is not only how Chinese systems differ from Western ones but also how labor rights, cultural plurality, privacy, and public responsibility can be protected across unequal ecosystems.

A related issue concerns the description of Chinese platforms as "over-governed" in political expression but "under-governed" in privacy, labor protection, and antitrust. Although the distinction is illuminating, it may imply an unstated liberal ideal of regulatory balance. "Schizophrenic governance" is ultimately more persuasive because it explains promotion and restriction as mutually reinforcing features of state-platform relations rather than deviations from a presumed norm. The book's comparison also remains largely China–West. More sustained engagement with East Asian systems such as LINE and KakaoTalk could further complicate the image of parallel platform worlds (Steinberg, 2020), although the omission is understandable in a concise introduction.

Chinese Platforms succeeds because it makes a broad theoretical intervention without losing sight of the institutions and people through which platforms operate. It will be particularly useful to students and researchers in platform studies, Chinese media studies, digital labor, and global communication. Its clear structure also suits graduate teaching. Specialists may want deeper comparison among Asian platform systems and a more explicit account of public value, but these reservations do not diminish the book's main contribution: It presents Chinese platforms neither as copies nor exceptions but as globally consequential formations through which the increasingly multipolar platform economy can be understood.

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