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Daniela Stockmann and Ting Luo, **Governing Digital China,** Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2025, 294 pp., $115.00 (hardcover), $38.00 (paperback).

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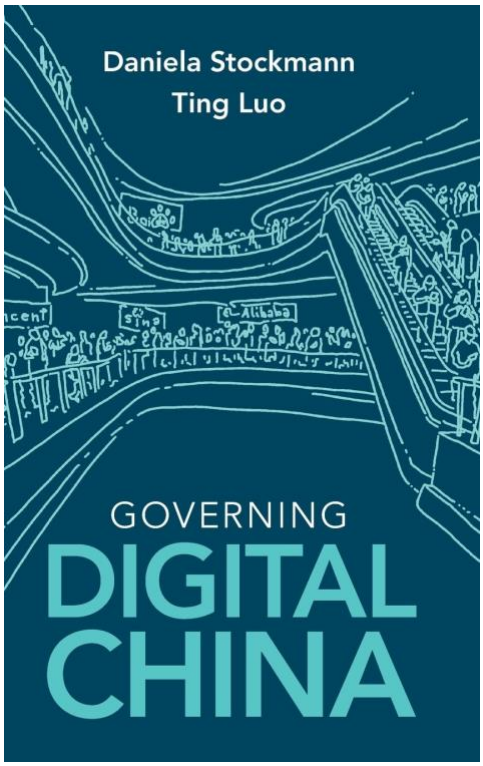


China's approach to digital governance has gained global influence and is often compared to an Orwellian "Big Brother." Journalists, policy makers, and scholars routinely portray Chinese digital governance as a seamless surveillance machine in which the party-state commands, platforms comply, and citizens submit. In ***Governing Digital China***, a volume by Daniela Stockmann and Ting Luo in the Communication, Society and Politics series, which examines the political and social impacts of communication processes and systems in national, comparative, and global contexts, Daniela Stockmann and Ting Luo offer what is arguably the most empirically ambitious challenge to this view to date. Drawing on a decade of fieldwork, the authors argue that China's digital sphere is governed not by command and control but by what they call "popular corporatism" (p. 5). In this partnership between the state and business, large platform firms serve as "consultants and insiders" (p. 14) to the state, while citizens set a "bottom line" (p. 15) through their voluntary production of data that platforms, and indirectly the state, cannot afford to ignore.

The book opens with what the authors call the "digital dilemma" (chapter 1). How can an authoritarian state reap the economic benefits of interactive digital technology, which requires openness, while containing its politically destabilizing potential? The authors answer that only partial liberalization serves both economic growth and regime stability. Coercion remains in the toolbox, but it is complemented and often replaced by co-optation. Chapter 2 develops the logic of popular corporatism and highlights the bottom-up influences of China's largest platform firms and its citizens. It shows how Chinese tech companies such as Tencent, Sina, Baidu, and Alibaba leverage their technical expertise, infrastructure, data, and reach to secure concessions from the state, thereby forming a state-company partnership. Meanwhile, citizens voluntarily produce data, which gives platform firms an incentive to cater to user needs and, at times, to resist state demands.

The empirical chapters are organized into two parts. Part I examines social media governance across the Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping eras. Chapter 3 shows that Tencent and Sina acquired insider status in public opinion management, a finding creatively documented through single-source government procurement notices in which state agencies name these firms as the only qualified providers. Chapter 4

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profiles "lurkers" and "discussants," finding that social and informational needs outweigh privacy concerns in driving political engagement online, a Chinese variant of the familiar "privacy paradox" (p. 101). Chapter 5 delivers one of the book's most consequential findings: Users who experience online discourse as more open and diverse express greater trust in the central government. Censorship, in other words, is not costless for the regime.

Part II turns to the social credit system (SCS). In chapter 6, the authors challenge the "Nosedive" image popularized by *Black Mirror* (p. 125). They show that Alibaba's pilot credit-rating initiatives predated the state's 2014 SCS blueprint, that commercial ratings inspired rather than followed government designs, and that Alibaba and Tencent successfully resisted centralized data sharing, forcing the state to accept a jointly owned "united credit agency" (p. 143) as a compromise. Chapter 7 demonstrates that offering financial incentives is a successful strategy for motivating users to adopt surveillance tools in the context of commercial credit rating. Chapter 8 presents a genuinely counterintuitive result. In communities deeply integrated into Alibaba's e-financial ecosystem, citizens are more supportive of state management of the SCS because they experience credit rating as a financial rather than political tool. Paradoxically, corporate penetration strengthens issue-specific trust in the state.

The book's greatest strength lies in its empirical foundation. Stockmann and Luo draw on data from the China Survey 2008 (CS 2008) and the China Internet Survey (CIS 2018), both nationally representative, face-to-face surveys, and they employed iterative spatial sampling via GPS. The survey data is supplemented by over 100 qualitative interviews with product managers, officials, and Internet users, as well as by the procurement data provided by ChinaFile. This triangulation allows the authors to observe the relationships among the state, business, and citizen from multiple sides in ways that studies relying on scraped platform data or elite interviews alone cannot. Their careful handling of social desirability bias and their attention to nonusers and lurkers, groups systematically excluded from platform-derived data, set a methodological standard for survey research in authoritarian contexts.

Theoretically, *Governing Digital China* makes a valuable contribution by bridging political communication scholarship with political economy research on platform power (Culpepper & Thelen, 2020) and state-business relations in China (Pearson et al., 2023). Building on Roberts's (2018) influential account of porous censorship, Stockmann and Luo explain why porousness persists, in which it is not merely a technical limitation but a functional feature that platforms defend and the regime tolerates because it sustains trust. Compared with Brussee (2023), who limits the social credit system to state-run infrastructure, their broader definition with integration of commercial ratings better matches how ordinary citizens actually encounter the system. Their account also supplies the bottom-up mechanisms largely missing from Lei's (2023) gilded cage and Pei's (2024) surveillance-state analyses.

Nevertheless, the argument is not without vulnerabilities. The core survey evidence dates from 2008 and 2018, before the antitrust crackdown, Jack Ma's fall from grace, and the zero-COVID-19 enforcement that visibly politicized credit tools. The authors address this in a thoughtful concluding chapter and read the crackdown as confirmation of their framework, with the state flexing its muscles precisely because firms had grown too influential. This reading is plausible but not falsifiable within the book's own evidence, and readers may reasonably wonder whether popular corporatism describes a durable equilibrium

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or a temporary arrangement specific to the 2008 to 2020 period. In addition, the causal chain linking user bottom lines to platform resistance and then to state concessions rests partly on inference. As the authors acknowledge, backroom negotiations between CEOs and political elites remain a black box, and timing and correlation carry much of the argumentative weight. Finally, the label "popular" may promise more than it delivers. Citizens influence outcomes only in the aggregate and only when platforms find it profitable to listen, a form of agency considerably weaker than the term suggests.

Despite these caveats, the book's implications extend far beyond China. Stockmann and Luo persuasively argue that the mechanisms of popular corporatism are not culturally specific. Any authoritarian state with sufficient economic resources can co-opt platform firms, and U.S.-based companies acting as campaign consultants or infrastructure providers may play analogous insider roles elsewhere. Their closing observation, that China's digital governance is bound together by a positive vision that liberal democracies currently lack, is provocative and deserves debate in policy circles preoccupied with what to prohibit rather than what to build.

Ultimately, *Governing Digital China* could be recommended to scholars in political communication, comparative politics, as well as social media and platform governance research. Its accessible writing and well-organized empirical chapters render it highly suitable for graduate seminars. Readers seeking a technical account of censorship infrastructure or a legal analysis of Chinese data regulation should pair it with Roberts (2018) and Zhang (2024). As a theoretically rigorous and empirically grounded corrective to both the Big Brother and the brave new world stereotypes, this book is likely to become the benchmark reference for understanding how China governs its digital ecosystem.

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