

#51 Public Values of Chinese Digital Technologies and their Impacts on Europe

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Key Takeaways

- Chinese digital technologies are increasingly ubiquitous in Europe and come with consequences, but their values and governance models remain poorly understood in comparison with their US counterparts.
- China and the EU differ fundamentally on the relationship between digital technology, the state, and individual rights, but these differences should not obscure important areas of value convergence.
- The Chinese state exerts substantial influence over digital companies, even as private companies continue to act with a significant degree of agency and independence.
- China's digital governance is simultaneously among the world's most restrictive for individual liberty and the most ambitious in regulating and harnessing digital technologies in governance.
- Adoption of AI in China is uneven across society and technologies and reveals the same fundamental public value tensions as in Europe. It can be driven by top-down policy or societal forces and popular trends.
- Public values travel with technology exports, but the values of Chinese digital technologies are not uniform. Each app has different norms.

Recommendations

- Implement near-term and long-term Europe-wide solutions to combat challenges arising from Chinese digital technologies. These responses should avoid one-size fits-all assumptions or solutions, should be designed in a country-agnostic fashion, and should prioritise comprehensive approaches over blanket bans.
- Establish and maintain a cross-cutting dialogue about technology with Chinese counterparts, focused on establishing a mutual understanding on fundamental value-related issues.
- Build sustained, comparative analytical capacity on Chinese technology governance as a substantive policy object.
- Treat AI-driven workforce displacement as a near-term European policy question, not a long-term one.
- Effective content moderation should not pursue protectionism and outright bans, as this fuels counter-cultural desire. Rather than banning Chinese content, effective policy should pivot toward comprehensive and radical contextualisation of China.

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Executive Summary

Chinese technologies are becoming more present in European lives. Ecommerce, social media, and AI are increasingly flowing from China, competing with what was earlier an American monopoly. These digital technologies also bring challenges. Without proper governance, they threaten public values like privacy, equal treatment, autonomy and human dignity. Given the growing global impact of Chinese technologies, European stakeholders must better understand their design and development. The values and ideas that inspire Chinese technology governance, development and adoption are complex, and this report examines the public values embedded in Chinese digital technologies as well as the processes that create them.

The Chinese Communist Party plays a predominant role in the shaping of values in the public sphere, but these values are simultaneously contested by society and companies. A fundamental difference between Chinese and European digital values is that Chinese rights and liberties are only tolerated if aligned with Party goals. The Party promotes ‘mainstream values’ in its implementation of digital technologies. These are more socially conservative than in Europe, but sometimes the value systems align, for example regarding addiction, digital exclusion, adult or harmful content, and personal information protection. Corporations and citizens do not fully lack agency. Concerns arising from a desire for profit or public pressure can lead to the adaptation of the public norms.

Arguably more than anywhere in the world, the Chinese government is the central player in shaping and steering the development and adoption of digital technologies. China’s digital governance is shaped by a persistent tension between informatisation – the ambition to deploy digital technologies to drive economic development, improve public services and strengthen state capacity – and cybersecurity, understood broadly as controlling the social, economic and political risks generated by technology. This produces a regulatory model that differs markedly from the EU’s: highly centralised in political direction, but often iterative, targeted and experimental in practice.

Adoption of AI has moved at a speed the central state has worked to keep up with. Public values, such as the autonomy of work, the equity of access to social infrastructure, the integrity of grief and shared reality, are impacted by AI as they are in Europe. What sets Beijing’s approach apart is the high speed at which these clashes are addressed in regulation. Regarding the use of Chinese apps internationally, the public values visible in Chinese social media and technology as they go global offer an important window onto China’s public values. The values it demonstrates globally are Chinese values.

The central thread of this report is that “China” and its digital technologies should not be essentialised nor seen as a monolith. Diverse interests are at play and clash to create policy.