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The platformization of Chinese Society: infrastructure, governance, and practice

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Introduction

Social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, as well as platforms for collaborative consumption such as Airbnb and Uber, are emerging as new power players that challenge older institutions and disrupt economic sectors such as journalism, hospitality, and transport. Although online platforms were initially celebrated as vehicles of the “participatory society” and the “sharing economy,” they quickly proved less emancipatory than they first appeared. Rather than simply facilitating citizen participation and entrepreneurialism, they enable the “datafication” and “commodification” of all social relations by collecting, algorithmically processing, circulating, and selling user data (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Fuchs, 2017). Furthermore, platform corporations skillfully circumvent national labor laws and trade unions, intensifying labor precaritization, and undermining existing businesses and institutions, such as newspapers, hotels, and taxi companies, which operate within established regulatory frameworks (Scholz, 2016). Thus, over the past few years, we have witnessed the rapid proliferation of both critical academic and popular discourse that has focused on the dangers, abuses, and risks that are the consequences of platformization. Building on political economic, business and software studies research, Nieborg and Poell (2018, p. 4276) have defined this process as “the penetration of economic, governmental, and infrastructural extensions of digital platforms into the web and app ecosystems.” Because this comprehensive definition is *institutional*, the study of platformization needs to be opened to the realms of the *social* and the *cultural*, which is the topic of the present special issue. We chart our exploration by way of China.

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By adopting a universal perspective, several scholars have called upon governments and other regulatory bodies to intervene in the emerging platform society, not leaving its development solely to the dynamics of the market (Khan, 2017; Pasquale, 2018; Srnicek, 2017; Van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018). Although this call for increased regulation is particularly welcome in the US and Europe, it seems problematic, if not ironic, in the Chinese context. We are currently witnessing the fast process of the platformization of Chinese society. The ubiquity of WeChat in everyday Chinese life presents the best example as Plantin and De Seta demonstrate in this special issue. However, in the context of omnipresent government regulation and intervention in China, platformization generates a set of problems and issues that differ from those in the West. Similarly, we need to critically interrogate the seemingly “natural” connection between the platform society and “global capitalism,” which has been theorized as “platform capitalism” (Srnicek, 2016). China presents an odd case, as it is hard to consider China a capitalist society (Nonini, 2008). Hence, our aim is to engage critically with the platformization of Chinese society by applying the case of China as a *method* (Chen, 2010) to interrogate, complicate, and complement current research on the global rise of the platform society. We thus ask the following question: What does the platform society mean for China, and what does China mean for our thinking about the platform society?

There are, of course, several dangers in posing such a question. It tends to reproduce the dichotomy of China versus the West. As Herold and de Seta (2015, p. 68) rightly observed, nearly every paper on the Internet in the People’s Republic of China has started with variations of “The Chinese Internet is huge, it is diverse, and it is different from the Internet elsewhere.” Furthermore, only American and Chinese platform companies have been listed in the top ten most valuable brands, which includes Tencent and Alibaba as well as eight US companies.¹ At present, it seems fair to say that the global platform economy is dominated by American and Chinese companies in that order, which has been reflected in hilarious newspaper headings referring to the battle between BAT versus GAFAM.² Another danger of making this comparison is that it leads to gross generalizations, which are translated into assumed cultural and political differences that are unequivocally mapped onto the nation-state (van der Veer, 2016), as if China or the US is a fixed homogeneous entity.

Because of its rapid development and ubiquity of platforms, supported by the government’s Internet Plus and China 2025 policies (Keane, 2016), China, arguably, offers a case to envision a possible future of, say, a particular European state like the Netherlands or city, such as London or Paris. Berry made this point in the analysis of public screens in Shanghai, an area in which Western countries are “lagging” behind. He concluded, “perhaps it is more productive to ask if the emphasis on speed of circulation and the production of a global marketplace is not producing a situation where new media technologies are taken up in a manner that is at once local and coeval, leading to even greater levels of heterogeneity than are produced by global adaptation and variation alone” (Berry, 2013, p. 130). Thus, it is vital to steer away from geopolitical binarism, methodological nationalism, and techno-orientalism, in which China is perceived as the model of the future. Instead, the challenge is to explore overlaps and similarities, alongside differences, and to zoom in on contradictions, ambivalences, and connections, rendering it urgent to commit to detailed, locally specific, and empirical analyses. In other words, inquiries into the institutional dimensions of platformization need to

be systematically coupled with studies of evolving cultural practices. The contributions to this special issue attest to this commitment.

In the rest of this introduction, inspired by the contributions to this special issue, we would like to propose three different vectors – infrastructure, governance, and practices – to analyze the articulation of institutional and cultural processes of platformization. The overall aim of the contributions, to paraphrase Berry’s framework, is to explore the local and coeval platformization of Chinese society.

Infrastructure

Interfaces and their semiotics, as well as the algorithms and data streams of platforms,+ are part of the infrastructural dimension, in which differences and similarities among platforms are located (Helmond, 2015; Hookway, 2014; McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015; Plantin, Lagoze, Edwards, & Sandvig, 2018). As discussed in this special issue, judging by the rapid development of Alipay’s social credit system (i.e. Chong), the datafication strategies used in the taxi app DiDi Chuxing (Chen & Qiu) and the increasing number of third-party apps, so-called Mini Programs, in WeChat (Plantin & Seta), we witness in China an extremely rapid process of platformization of infrastructures and infrastructuralization of platforms (Plantin et al., 2018). As the boundaries between platforms and public infrastructures have become increasingly porous, platforms are more and more a part of our everyday lives. This development is strongly aligned with the infrastructural ambitions of the Chinese authorities, clearly aiming to leapfrog into an advanced technological future. Although we can trace similar developments in the US and Europe, this process has developed at greater speed and intensity in China. It helps explain the pervasiveness – in terms of scale, functionalities, and user base – of WeChat in Chinese society. As Plantin and Seta show in this issue, WeChat Pay has become a multiparty infrastructure in China’s digital economy, rendering “real” money almost obsolete and supplementing the previous dysfunctional banking system.

Terminological fissures between notions of infrastructure and platform aside, according to insights in science and technology studies, the way in which platforms operate differs significantly between per locality as well as per user: between urbanites and rural inhabitants, migrant workers and creative workers, and men and women (Qiu, 2016; Wyatt, Henwood, Miller, & Senker, 2000; Zeng, 2019). Technologies can also be appropriated and tweaked, which is demonstrated in Sun’s study in this issue, which shows that delivery workers are to a large extent steered by the algorithms of platforms such as Baidu. However, these algorithms are also acted upon and thus tweaked to help delivery workers survive the job. This finding complicates the idea of the alleged totalizing control of platform algorithms. And yet, Chong’s study demonstrates that the algorithms of Alipay’s credit system do have the power to divide people. Strikingly, the sentiment proclaimed by the users in her study is one of indifference; they feel they are monitored anyway in China, and they do not have much to hide.

Taken together, the articles suggest that while the platformization of Chinese society resembles the rise of the platform society in the US and Europe, it is also distinct in terms of the central involvement of the state. Rather than slowing

down platformization, this entanglement between state and corporations appears to accelerate and intensify this process, enhancing the penetration of platform infrastructures in every sphere of life. This brings us to the dimension of governance.

Governance

The key difference between cultural and technological companies in China and elsewhere may well be the intrusive role of the state (de Kloet & Fung, 2017). But what difference does it make that each big company in China needs a government affairs department to lubricate its connections with the state? How is the government implicated in ranking systems and data extraction, and how are the finances among and between companies and the state intertwined? Such questions also have implications for the ownership of data, raising issues about the surveillance, control, and marketing of data (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Trottier & Fuchs, 2014). A case in point is the government app *Xuexi Qiangguo* (know your strong country), which was released on 31 January 2019. The app, which is obligatory for Party members, disseminates news about China, specifically President Xi Jinping. More poignantly, the app uses different methods to calculate personal scores for its users. For example, a user earns one point after spending at least two minutes on an article regarding Xi's latest trip. The algorithm thus tries to preempt calculated uses. Some work places and schools already oblige their employees and students to reach good scores. This patriotic app was developed in cooperation with Alibaba. Furthermore, Alibaba's Alipay system is embedded in the app, which indicates the intertwining of capital and the state, and the mutual exchange of data. It also shows how keen the state is in processes of platformization that serves its interests.

The metaphor of platform (*pingtai* 平台) is interesting. It evokes images of a podium, a stage, or an elevated structure that invites people to gather, to act, to work, and to express opinions and ideas. This metaphor resonates with a prevailing line of research in Chinese Internet studies, in which new technologies are expected to enhance freedom (Herold & de Seta, 2015). However, Schneider (2019) showed that in China, the national and the technological are deeply enmeshed, resulting in a much more complicated scenario. He argued that the authorities have adopted a model of governance, which "restricts direct control over meanings to sensitive political issues and otherwise promotes collaboration and participation in processes of meaning-making." Schneider points to the importance of the Party and state agents in "setting the parameters of discourse but allowing diverse actors to negotiate the exact meanings" (Schneider, 2019, p. 225).

The articles in this special issue, in one way or the other, attest to the intrusive role of the state in the platformization of Chinese society. Chen and Qiu show, for example, that China has become an infrastructural state by partly relying on the datafication strategies of different platforms, while Wang and Lobato trace how video-sharing platforms have become intertwined with state governance. Although platformization clearly unfolds differently in China from that in Europe or the US, it, intricately, does not simply revolve around surveillance, but rather around governance. Governance refers to the wide variety of ways in which platforms

govern users, the state governs platforms, and users have particular expectations of platforms. As Wang and Lobato demonstrate, users of iQiyi ask for uniformity in services, and participants in the social credit system express desire for security, trust, and good government (Chong). It is in this complex interplay between datafication and affordance, between money and meaning, and between surveillance and security, where governance comes to the fore.

Practice

As it became clear in the previous sections, both infrastructure and governance always already involve people and practices. Institutions and culture cannot be separated. Similar to infrastructures and governance, user practices are specific to time and place (Poell, de Kloet, & Zeng, 2014; Qiu, 2016). Examining these practices immediately makes clear that platformization also opens up or *affords* possibilities for empowerment, labor and play. The widespread use of GIFs and memes in WeChat facilitates communication, expands the possibility of expressing a wide range of emotions without resorting to words, and provides a space for fun and irony (Kuang & Qiu, 2017). Chinese platforms users send manipulated images of Xi Jinping, who claps to show his support, or of Jiang Zemin, who makes strange movements while proclaiming, “too young, too simple, sometimes naïve.” The visual interfaces of platforms are often cute, cartoonesque, and even carnivalesque, inserting a sense of childish innocence in the everyday. As Wang and Sanders show in their study in this issue, the use among rural female users of WeChat “adds to their knowledge-building, business acumen, emotive communicating, and new levels of self-awareness.” At the same time, they demonstrate that WeChat serves as a tool for cultural governance and the promotion of certain idealized types of femininity.

Wang and Sanders’s study also considers the important issue of platform labor, as women use WeChat in their small business operations. Labor is a recurring theme in different contributions to this special issue. Elsewhere, van Doorn examined how contracted labor was being replaced by “platform labor,” which adopts “a more austere and zero-liability peer-to-peer model that leverages software to optimize labor’s flexibility, scalability, tractability, and its fragmentation.” (van Doorn, 2017, p. 901). His study is part of a growing body of literature that discusses and usually critiques increasing labor precarity and precaritization. However, the question is whether the notion of precarity fits the context of China, where the old “iron rice bowl” of job security conjures memories of a more collective, poorer, and more communist past, memories that are not always positive. Researchers working on labor problematics in China have alerted to the historicity and specificity of the Chinese experience, arguing for more empirical and nuanced ways to examine precarity (see Chow, 2019; Lin, 2019).

Live streaming presents a case in point to explore platform labor. As the study of Zhang et al. in this issue shows, the constant monetization of virtual gifting precludes possibilities of empowerment and increases platform exploitation and inequality. Streamer guilds focus more on money-making than on opening possibilities for communitarian and reciprocal relationships. Yet, Lin and de Kloet (2019) show elsewhere how live streamers on *Kuaishou*, a platform targeting second- and third-tier cities in China, turn grassroots citizens into unlikely creative

producers, opening opportunities for creative entrepreneurship, folded in the algorithmic and financial logic of the platform. Again, we are confronted with the simultaneous dynamics of exploitation and empowerment. This is also the conclusion of Sun's contribution on delivery labor, which has become, in her view, both more accessible and more precarious in China. She observes that the Chinese state, like in the West, is only starting to regulate these labor practices, resulting in a well-nigh capitalist logic of the delivery platforms.

Conclusion: waiting for the platform society

The questions posed earlier in this introduction to this special issue asked the following: What does China mean for our thinking about the platform society? How can we recalibrate the emerging field of platform studies to make it more sensitive to particular cultural practices and local contexts? How do the articles in this special issue help us to address this question? We have shown how, along the vectors of infrastructure, governance, and practice, there are both differences and overlaps between Chinese platforms and those elsewhere. Meanwhile, the fragmentation of the platform society goes on *ad infinitum*. There are differences between specific platforms (WeChat, DiDi Chuxing, and iQiyi), between users (from affluent urbanites to migrant workers), and between regions of the world.

We are bound to end up with a rather conventional conclusion: platformization is not a uniform process, but follows different trajectories along the vectors of infrastructure, governance, and practice. Along these vectors, we can identify key differences between localities and actors, which will continue to multiply. However, these trajectories are by no means isolated from each other, as platforms constantly copy the features of other platforms, and users adopt practices and vernaculars from other users. Platformization is thus simultaneously a local and coeval process (Berry, 2013).

The platform society does not exist. Like Samuel Beckett's *Godot*, what, then, are we left with? We are left with time- and place-specific processes of platformization; their instability and contingency demand scholarly scrutiny that is sensitive to empirical detail and to specificity. Following van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal (2018, p. 4), we understand the platform society as a "contested concept." Rather than referring to consolidated sets of relations, this concept highlights the ongoing social struggles and negotiations concerning digital platforms as they become increasingly integrated in daily life. The contributions to this special issue attest to the diversity and complexity of this process in China. Acknowledging the contested nature of platformization also means that the platform society could take a wide variety of forms (Mohan & Punathambekar, 2019). Platformization is not a unidirectional process. One can imagine alternative connections, assemblages, and futures. Alongside processes of platformization, there are always possibilities for deplatformization. What matters most are the strategic connections and alignments we aim at, and those from which we need to steer away.

Notes

1. <https://money.cnn.com/2018/05/28/news/companies/biggest-brands-ranking-2018-alibaba-tencent/index.html>. Accessed 30 May 2019.

2. Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent (BAT) versus Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft (GAFAM). See, for example, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/world-phygital-business-models-2019-gafam-google-apple-facebook-amazon-microsoft-and-bat-baidu-alibaba-tencent—the-internet-giants-driving-the-phygital-world-300797173.html>. Accessed 30 May 2019.

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