

Michael Keane, Haiqing Yu, Elaine J. Zhao, and Susan Leong (Eds.), **China's Digital Presence in the Asia-Pacific: Culture, Technology and Platforms**, London, UK: Anthem, 2020, 210 pp., \$125.00 (hardcover).

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With recent moves to ban ByteDance's application, TikTok, in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and—most pressingly to the context of the volume that is the subject of this review—Australia, Chinese digital technologies and industry are more relevant than ever to the global economy, perceived security concerns, and Chinese soft power. ***China's Digital Presence in the Asia-Pacific: Culture, Technology and Platforms*** arrived just prior to this global conversation, and deploys novel frameworks to approach the reception of Chinese culture and digital technology outside the People's Republic. In doing so, the authors move against the grain of the historiography and create a volume valuable to established scholars and students alike.



In essence, the book explores China's digital presence in relation to its cultural influence. The authors organize this exploration along three themes: culture +, technology +, and platforms +. Utilizing the "+" symbol indicates a two-fold phenomenon: the convergence(s) of culture, technology, and platforms and the idea within the current Chinese political discourse that digital technologies are a positive force. Specifically, the authors reference Premier Li Keqiang's 2014 announcement of the development slogan "Mass Entrepreneurship, Mass Innovation" (*dazhong chuangye, wanzhong chuangxin*), at the World Economic Forum summer meeting and the associated policy campaign, Internet + (p. 3).

The authors situate this volume in the broader literature examining the political, economic, and social influence of digital technologies in and on China. They identify three foci of the current scholarship: the Internet as a site of contestation that acts as a democratizing force; the rapid turn to digital economies and platforms, such as e-commerce, social networking, and video streaming; and Internet technologies as a point of entry for Western corporations into Chinese markets (Herold & de Seta, 2015; Qiu & Bu, 2013; Qiu & Chan, 2004). After reading this scholarship, the authors of *China's Digital Presence in the Asia-Pacific* are left with two questions and use this volume to probe them: Can China's entrepreneurs, innovators, filmmakers, writers, and artists change perceptions of China in the Asia-Pacific? and, Is digital technology strengthening China's cultural power?

China's Digital Presence in the Asia-Pacific, rather, fills a lacuna in the historiography: the influence of Chinese digital technologies beyond the borders of mainland People's Republic of China (PRC). Ultimately, the authors argue that the Internet and digital platforms contribute not only to enhancing China's economic productivity and connectivity but also its presence and influence in the world. In doing so, they operate inversely to the current scholarship, and demonstrate the shift from China adapting to the Internet in the

late 1990's and early 2000's, to its integral role in PRC soft and hard power. Through this intervention, the authors aim to analyze Beijing's changing policies toward the governance of Internet technologies, to demonstrate how the global perception of China is changing, and to examine how China's image is understood in the Asia-Pacific.

The authors divide *China's Digital Presence* into two parts. Part 1, *China's '+' Long Game*, uses the government's rhetoric of "+," signifying the positivity of China's digital industries, as a framework to understand culture, industry, Internet, and platforms. The second part, *The Asia-Pacific as a Chinese Cultural Landing Pad*, identifies the Asia-Pacific as a, if not *the*, dominant consumer market for Chinese culture and media. Part 2 examines how users in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, Australia, and New Zealand are adapting to the widespread availability of Chinese print and social media(s).

Chapter 1, "Culture +," examines the confluence of culture and media with digital technologies and the Internet from the late 1990s on. Without naming it, the authors point to Mao Zedong's speech at the Yan'an Forum in 1942, establishing the trajectory of all Chinese cultural production as being in service to state and party politics. It is through this dilemma that the authors establish Chinese culture as less globally relevant than Japanese or South Korean cultural export, and thus in need of improvement to compete with geographically proximate neighbors. For ministers of culture to expand soft power and change the perception of Chinese media, and thus China, in the global media landscape then, they have had to adapt media to the influences of the Internet, loosen restrictions, and work with, rather than against, hegemonic global media infrastructures (e.g., Hollywood, Silicon Valley).

Chapter 2, "Industry +," moves away from culture proper to the infrastructure of its development and distribution. The authors look to Chinese culture and media industrial development since 1979 and the attention placed on digital creative industries by tracing the innovation timeline of digital technologies and their relationship to, and position in, entrepreneurship within the fringes of China's regulated economy. They find that policy, infrastructure (e.g., zones, parks, studios, and low-cost production centers), agglomeration, competition, and eventually official designation culminate in the convergences of culture (or, Marxist-Leninist superstructure) and industry (concrete manifestation of economic policy).

Chapter 3, "Internet +," looks to the Internet as a conduit for Chinese content to leave China and for global content to enter. Since the advent of the Internet in China, there have been efforts to regulate and control what is and is not visible/accessible to users. However, party policy implementation advocates for a strengthening of digital industries in order to position China as a global superpower, particularly in artificial intelligence, with the development of Internet + into the Information + campaign. The authors argue here that Internet + and associated policy initiatives have given an ideologically sound basis for capitalist enterprise, become the center of China's regime stability and global cyber governance, and are pivotal to China's sustained development in the 21st century.

Methodologically rich, chapter 4, "Platform +," enters into the emergent field of platform studies to demonstrate the entanglements of Chinese digital technologies among platforms, the platform economy, and the platform society. The chapter also demonstrates the new face of Chinese communications industries that is at once global capitalist, cozied up to the party-state, and critical to the "going out" initiative.

Referencing Gillespie's (2010) seminal essay, the PRC approach to online platforms appears to the authors as a manifestation of digital capitalism in which Chinese corporate entities such as Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent use the success of their product within the PRC as a platform in and of itself to create localized business opportunities in the greater Asia-Pacific region.

Chapter 5, "Assessing the Evidence," is the first chapter in part 2 and lays out the method by which the authors evaluate the data sets collected for their localized studies across the Asia-Pacific that appear in the following chapters. The authors find that traditional aggregate measures depict a globally favorable view of China; however, the PRC faces problems with exporting its media and finding global audiences for Chinese film, television, music, and platforms. This is primarily due to Western distrust in undemocratically elected leadership and necessary ties between the Chinese government and media production. A problem that arises in chapter 5 is that the authors seem cognizant of the problems that surveys pose in evaluating "soft power" (or "influence," as their second and third surveys describe it) without demonstrating their efforts to avoid repeating these problems.

Chapters 6, 7, and 8 move into case studies of the influence of Chinese media across localized contexts of East Asia, Southeast Asia, and Oceania. The three chapters demonstrate that Chinese audiovisual content has an uneven foothold across the Asia-Pacific region as a whole and has unique properties across these localized contexts. In ending with chapter 9, "From Cultural Presence to Innovation Nation," the authors point to some challenges Chinese digital diplomacy faces within the Asia-Pacific and beyond, namely Western suspicion and Chinese internal debate, in order to gesture toward potential futures.

China's Digital Presence in the Asia-Pacific ultimately contributes greatly to the subfields of Chinese digital industries, technology, and economic strategy. The volume comes at a time when the scholarship, which already produced a vast set of literature with recognizable patterns, necessitates an historiographical intervention, but also when the field is evolving into a new set of questions and problems. With TikTok becoming a key figure in the global discourse concerning Chinese digital technologies, and their supposed security concerns, it will be rich to see ensuing research on the reception of Chinese culture since 2020, and beyond the Asia-Pacific. This book is required reading for anyone grappling with this discourse, Chinese digital technology, 21st-century economic policy, and cultural reception, and lays the groundwork for new approaches in scholarship on the "going out" of Chinese culture.

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