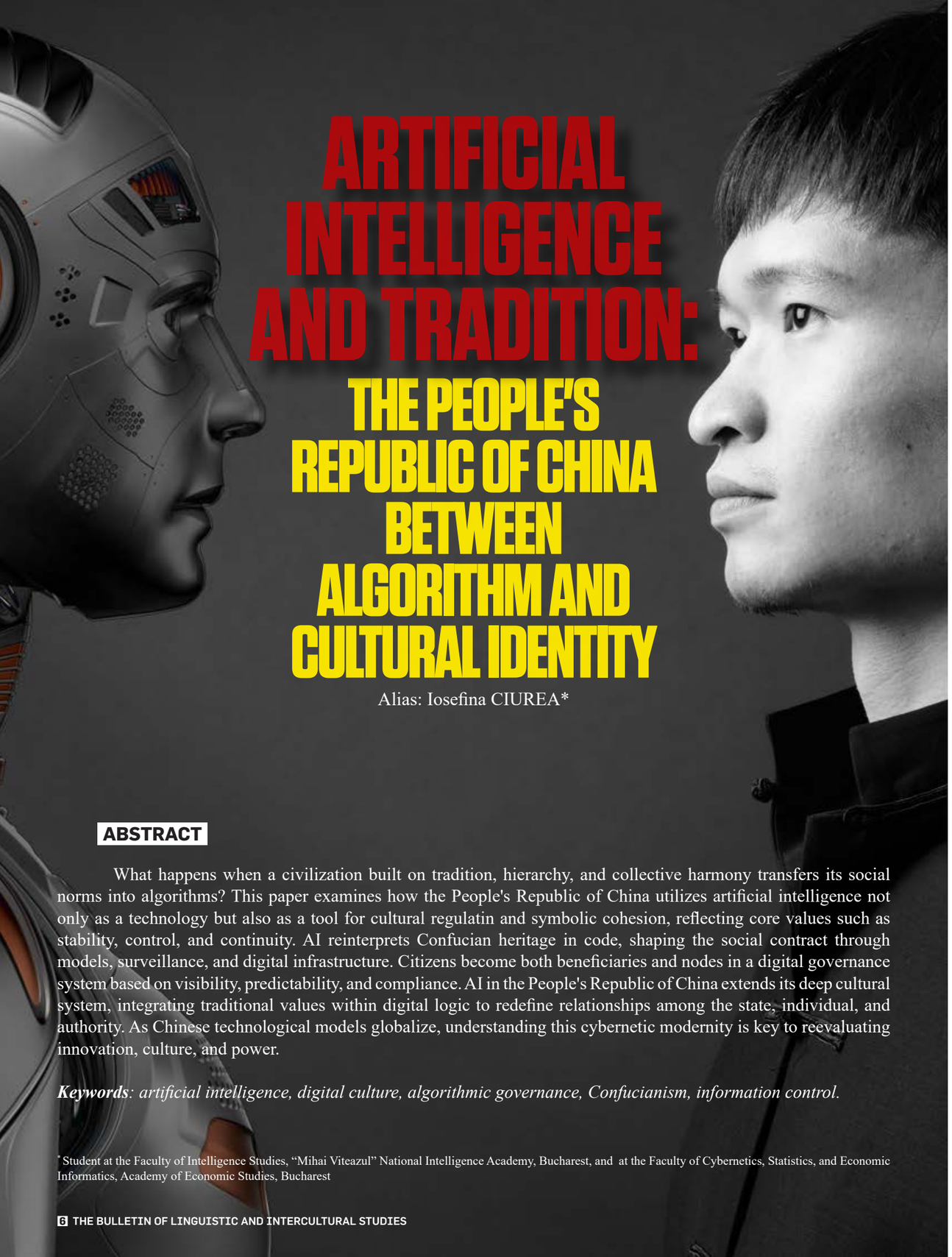

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND TRADITION: THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA BETWEEN ALGORITHM AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

Alias: Iosefina CIUREA*

ABSTRACT

What happens when a civilization built on tradition, hierarchy, and collective harmony transfers its social norms into algorithms? This paper examines how the People's Republic of China utilizes artificial intelligence not only as a technology but also as a tool for cultural regulatin and symbolic cohesion, reflecting core values such as stability, control, and continuity. AI reinterprets Confucian heritage in code, shaping the social contract through models, surveillance, and digital infrastructure. Citizens become both beneficiaries and nodes in a digital governance system based on visibility, predictability, and compliance. AI in the People's Republic of China extends its deep cultural system, integrating traditional values within digital logic to redefine relationships among the state, individual, and authority. As Chinese technological models globalize, understanding this cybernetic modernity is key to reevaluating innovation, culture, and power.

***Keywords**: artificial intelligence, digital culture, algorithmic governance, Confucianism, information control.*

* Student at the Faculty of Intelligence Studies, "Mihai Viteazul" National Intelligence Academy, Bucharest, and at the Faculty of Cybernetics, Statistics, and Economic Informatics, Academy of Economic Studies, Bucharest

Introduction

What does a five-thousand-year-old civilization look like when it engraves its thinking into algorithms? There may be no clear answer, but it is precisely where the cracks between tradition and technology appear that we begin to understand what kind of world is being born before our eyes. For centuries, the People's Republic of China was a cultural system centered on order, repetition, and tradition. In this world, rules did not change but were perpetuated, a universe where time flowed circularly and change was treated with suspicion. Confucius was not just a philosopher; he did not think in binary terms, but he was the architect of a circular social logic, in which authority was vertical and the individual integrated into the whole through respect and self-control (Fingarette, 1972). It is possible that, in the collective imagination, order came from within rather than from outside —a type of self-imposed discipline that precedes any digital architecture. In this cultural matrix, change was suspect, and technology, to the extent that it existed, was subordinate to morality. However, in less than half a century, the People's Republic of China has become not only a laboratory for forced modernization, but also a global leader in areas that were previously outside the traditional vocabulary: *machine learning, cloud governance, facial recognition, and big data*. It is not just about economic innovation, but about a long process of *identity reconfiguration*. We are not talking about a simple transition from paper to screen, but about a structural change in the way authority is expressed and internalized. In this context, it is natural to ask ourselves: what happens when a state that functions based on loyalty to authority begins to use AI not only as a tool, but as a *cultural mechanism?*

The transformations are not only visible in technological growth statistics or reports on AI investments (The Economist, 2023), but also in the way the relationship between the individual and society is being rewritten. The surveillance camera becomes a social mirror. The mobile app evaluates your civic behavior. What was once an unwritten code of shame or honor is now transposed into a digital score. And this score decides whether you are trustworthy. Algorithms define what you learn, what you buy, and sometimes even who you meet. It is not just about technology, but about a *new form of symbolic governance*, in which the code takes over the moral functions of tradition.

This paper begins with a simple yet essential question: How is the culture of a millennial civilization transformed by *the impact of digital technology*? Not at the level of propaganda, but in real life, in the educational system, in advertising, in community interactions, and in the way authority is transmitted. Thus, the analysis will focus on *the relationship between Chinese cultural values and artificial intelligence*, viewed as a geopolitical, economic, but above all, *intercultural* tool. The People's Republic of China is not only a consumer of Western technology but also an *exporter of standards, styles, and paradigms.* This export is not only economic or technological. It is an export of ways of structuring reality, of understanding what is 'normal, 'correct, and 'acceptable.' From TikTok to Confucius Institutes, from Baidu to smart city surveillance networks, we are faced with a culture that does not resist technology but assimilates it into the logic of its own social order. It is a form of adaptation that does not imitate but translates.

In today's People's Republic of China, the development of artificial intelligence does not replace traditional values. Instead, it frames them within a new type of logic —one that is digital yet strongly individualized. We are not witnessing a simple modernization, but a recalibration of the relationship between authority, technology, and culture. Traditional rituals have moved to the back-end. Authority no longer wears ancient ceremonial robes, but functions through settings and usage policies. Whether we refer to surveillance networks, automated educational platforms, or mobile applications that mediate citizen-state interactions, artificial intelligence is not neutral; it reflects cultural choices, political priorities, and particular forms of social organization. In this context, a subtle transformation is taking shape, away from the spotlight, of what we might call *the digital social contract*. Today's Chinese citizen is no longer defined solely by membership in a community or loyalty to the state, but also by the data they generate, their social score, and the predictable or deviant behaviors captured by algorithms. Rights and obligations are no longer negotiated only in ideological terms, but also in terms of access, algorithmic transparency, and digital visibility. We may not always be aware of this, but behind a daily scroll lies a subtle pedagogy of digital conformity. Technology thus becomes both the interface and the arbiter of the new relationship between the individual and authority.

This paper aims to provide a lens for understanding how a society with such well-established cultural reflexes negotiates its place in a global network that operates according to other, sometimes contradictory, rules. Through this analysis, we will examine how artificial intelligence is utilized in the People's Republic of China, not only as a technological tool, but also as a mechanism of cultural and political adjustment, serving as an additional layer over the Confucian heritage, straddling continuity and control, adaptation and surveillance. In what follows, we will highlight the pressing tension between algorithm and harmony, as well as between code and Confucianism.

Why the People's Republic of China?

What is happening today in the People's Republic of China, regarding the relationship between technology and social life, cannot be understood only through efficiency or innovation. Beyond the numbers, patents, and national strategies, a deeper question remains: how does culture shape the way a technology like artificial intelligence is imagined, implemented, and accepted? The People's Republic of China is a unique case because new technologies are integrated into a profound cultural matrix rooted in values of continuity, harmony, and social loyalty.

Artificial intelligence in the People's Republic of China is more than just a functional tool; it plays a role in reshaping the social order. Instead of relying on public debate, the state uses its ability to offer predictability and stability through code to strengthen its legitimacy. In a culture where authority has traditionally been cooperative and ritualized, the algorithm becomes a natural extension of control, and surveillance a gesture of care rather than an intrusion into private life. To truly understand this dynamic, it is essential to look beyond Western models of analysis. At the same time, the European political tradition involves a social contract in which individual freedoms are negotiated in exchange for protection (see Locke, Rousseau), while Confucian thought focuses on moral duty and positioning within stable hierarchies. The individual is not seen as an opponent of the state but as a part of a network of relationships aimed at producing harmony (Fingarette, 1972). In this perspective, AI can be viewed as a tool for maintaining balance rather than a threat to personal autonomy.

This difference in projection partly explains why projects such as the social credit system or facial recognition networks do not generate the same types of resistance in the People's Republic of China as they do in Western societies (Creemers, 2018). This is not because the population lacks critical awareness, but because the values through which technology is interpreted differ: stability is preferred to uncertainty, and the collective takes precedence over individual expression. Furthermore, the Chinese model of digital governance extends beyond its borders; it has global ambitions, whether we are discussing digital infrastructure in Africa or cultural influence through platforms such as TikTok (The Economist, 2023). Thus, the questions guiding this research are: *How does artificial intelligence reconfigure the relationship between the state, the individual, and cultural heritage in the contemporary People's Republic of China? Is AI a new form of ritual, another way of framing behaviors in a stable order? Or is it becoming, over time, a catalyst for disruptive forces in society that are difficult to observe from the outside?*

Algorithmic harmony or digital discipline?

When we discuss artificial intelligence in the People's Republic of China, we're not just talking about technology in a strict sense but an entire ecosystem of ideas, norms, and strategies embedded in code. Unlike in the West, where AI is often linked to the rule of law and individual creativity, in China, algorithms are designed to support social order, collective efficiency, and predictability. Technology does not replace the existing cultural system but rather enhances it in line with its own values: harmony, stability, and hierarchy.

Chinese technological progress in artificial intelligence has accelerated due to several factors, including substantial government investment, coordinated industrial policies such as the 2017 New Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan, access to extensive demographic data, and an administrative culture that favors large-scale projects. Currently, the People's Republic of China is fiercely competing with traditional Western innovation hubs, not only in production volumes but also in the quality of its AI models. A notable example is DeepSeek, one of the most advanced locally developed natural language processing models. DeepSeek is more than just a chatbot or an automated text-completion tool; it is an infrastructure that supports various sectors, including education, healthcare, and government analysis. The model incorporates Chinese cultural elements in how it prioritizes information, manages context, and interprets ambiguities, aligning with a highly contextual communication style typical of the Asian region. Similarly, Ernie Bot, created by Baidu, is the People's Republic of China's direct response to ChatGPT. Unlike Western models, Ernie is primarily trained on Chinese databases and operates within a strictly state-regulated framework, guided by the principle that "algorithms must serve social stability" (Baidu Research, 2023). Although its level of "creativity" is more limited compared to Western models, its deep understanding of the local cultural context makes it highly effective domestically.

Besides language processing models, China is also highly advanced in applying AI for surveillance and social control. Companies like SenseTime and iFlyTek have created sophisticated systems for facial recognition, voice identification, and predictive behavior analysis. While Western discussions often highlight worries about civil liberties with these technologies, in the People's Republic of China, they are framed as tools for "optimizing public safety" and "promoting social trust" (SenseTime Research Report, 2022).

A less discussed but essential aspect is the quiet reshaping of the Chinese internet, a world almost parallel to the global internet. Major platforms, including WeChat, Baidu, and Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok), are not only spaces for social interaction but also tools for behavioral modeling, subtly integrated into everyday life. This almost organic integration between social life and digital infrastructure is not accidental; it reflects a vision in which technology is not an external "tool" but a mechanism of social regulation.

At the same time, we cannot overlook the geopolitical implications of the People's Republic of China's technological advancements. The artificial intelligence developed in the People's Republic of China is not limited to national borders. By exporting digital infrastructure (5G networks, smart surveillance systems, communication platforms), the People's Republic of China is also exporting an implicit cultural model in which control, stability, and collective harmony are the dominant values. This expansion is not neutral: it causes tensions in the West, where fears arise about the infiltration of narratives favorable to Beijing through seemingly "neutral" platforms such as TikTok or AI translation applications (The Economist, 2024).

In this equation, artificial intelligence encompasses more than just technology. It is a language, a form of power, and a codified culture. It serves as a tool for reshaping Western and global perspectives on freedom. In the case of the People's Republic of China, what is encoded in the algorithm holds the same significance as what was once inscribed in rhythm and tradition. Confronted with these strategies, the Western world faces not only a technological challenge but also a cultural one. How prepared are liberal democracies to understand and respond to a form of algorithmic soft power built on premises other than transparency and individual autonomy?

The Chinese internet, a world unto itself

While in the West the internet has developed as an open, fluid, and fragmented network, in the People's Republic of China, it has been shaped from the outset as a controlled architecture, in which the circulation of information follows precise rules, designed not only technologically but also culturally. The Chinese internet is not a filtered copy of the global web. Still, a distinct construction of its own, organized as a vast internal network, selectively connected to the outside world and structured to support the values of social stability and national cohesion.

This reality has an informal name: the "Great Firewall," a technological and legislative system that filters, controls, and regulates data traffic between the People's Republic of China and the rest of the world (Roberts, 2018). Far from being just a tool for censorship, the firewall functions as a cultural filter: not all information is banned, but information that threatens internal cohesion or contradicts the official narrative is hidden, distorted, or blocked. Within this space, local platforms are not just alternatives to Western ones, but complete ecosystems with their own rules and dynamics. WeChat, for example, is not just a messaging app; it is a digital wallet, an official communication channel, a civic monitoring tool, and a cultural consumption platform. Baidu is not just a search engine, but an entire network of integrated services tailored to the internal priorities of the state and society. Douyin, the Chinese version of TikTok, is regulated to promote "positive" content, and its algorithms are adjusted to expose users to information deemed beneficial to social stability.

This organization does not imply a lack of diversity. In fact, the Chinese digital space is lively and highly competitive. However, internal dynamics are guided by unwritten rules, with self-censorship playing a key role. Digital companies, ranging from giants like Tencent and Alibaba to smaller startups, are responsible for monitoring their content and adhering to official directives. Therefore, control is not only enforced from the top down but also internalized within the operating logic of the digital ecosystem. This internalization subtly influences how users interact online. Instead of openly challenging authority, Chinese users often employ creative forms of adaptation, such as coded humor, cultural references, and visual symbols, that allow them to express alternative opinions without explicitly breaking the rules (Yang, 2009). This culture of digital adaptation shows that, despite regulation, the space remains an arena for negotiation and cultural reinterpretation.

On the other hand, the Chinese internet model has ambitions that extend beyond national borders. As Chinese digital infrastructure expands into regions such as Africa, Southeast Asia, and Eastern Europe, it is not only technology being exported but also the principle of controlled information management. Projects like the "Digital Silk Road" exemplify this approach, which involves building networks, selling smart city technology, and promoting a "sovereign" internet. These steps are part of a proposed alternative model of global connectivity by the People's Republic of China (The Economist, 2023). Therefore, the Chinese internet is not just a virtual space

but also a reflection of a political and cultural philosophy about how society should function: not through chaos and free debate, but through a balance of innovation and control, between selective openness and the preservation of internal order.

Algorithmic propaganda, transforming AI into a cultural weapon

If, within China, the internet has become a tool for managing social order, then, outside China, the same logic manifests as a global influence strategy. Artificial intelligence, recommendation algorithms, social networks, and digital infrastructure are no longer means of communication, but also vehicles for spreading a cultural and political worldview.

A crucial aspect of this strategy is the effective utilization of global digital platforms. For example, TikTok, although presented as a "neutral" entertainment app, has been repeatedly investigated for how it prioritizes or censors certain types of content based on geopolitical interests (The Economist, 2023). Its algorithms, trained to maximize engagement, are in fact configured to avoid topics sensitive to Beijing, while, in some cases, promoting narratives favorable to the Chinese government or intended to divide the Western public sphere.

More subtle than explicit censorship is the phenomenon of *shadow banning*: a technique in which uncomfortable content is not deleted but becomes invisible to most users through algorithmic adjustments. This method does not cause scandals or attract immediate attention, but it gradually erodes the space for free debate. At the same time, influence campaigns have been documented through influencer networks or seemingly independent accounts, particularly in the context of sensitive geopolitical events, including the protests in Hong Kong and the management of the COVID-19 pandemic (Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2021).

In terms of AI technologies themselves, the People's Republic of China has developed tools specialized in information manipulation and automated content generation, including deepfakes, persuasive videos, and automatically generated propaganda articles. Models such as those produced by iFLYTEK are not only used for translation and voice recognition but also for creating culturally and linguistically adapted media content for various target markets (IEEE Xplore, 2022).

This type of algorithmic propaganda fundamentally differs from traditional influence models. We are no longer discussing a message directly conveyed from the state to citizens, but rather an information environment in which users become co-creators of narratives, often without realizing it. Algorithms select, amplify, or diminish specific ideas, creating the illusion of spontaneous consensus when, in fact, there is subtle manipulation of public opinion. It is essential to recognize that this approach does not always aim to actively persuade others of the superiority of the Chinese model. More often, the main goal is to confuse, fragment, and relativize the truth within democratic spaces, thus creating more fertile ground for authoritarian alternatives (Lucas & Zhang, 2023).

Faced with these realities, the question becomes less "how do we protect the truth?" and more "how do we rebuild trust in an information landscape shaped by invisible actors?" The answer cannot come solely from technical regulations or political oversight. Still, it must involve a *profound cultural reflection* on how we perceive information, authority, and legitimacy in the age of algorithms.

What does the People's Republic of China tell us about the cyber future?

The Chinese digital model challenges many assumptions that have shaped Western technological progress. The belief that technology inherently promotes individual freedom, that internet globalization will naturally result in democratization, or that digital markets can operate independently of a society's cultural values, is contradicted by the Chinese internet, which is controlled, restricted, and, in some ways, exportable.

One of the most obvious lessons is that *technology is not neutral*. The code itself carries values, priorities, and assumptions about how the world should work. In the People's Republic of China, artificial intelligence is situated within an ecosystem of ideas centered on stability, collective harmony, and predictive control. In the West, AI was initially envisioned, at least in its early stages, as a tool for personal emancipation, optimizing autonomy, and expanding individual possibilities. However, global reality demonstrates that technology consistently amplifies the cultural foundations within the space where it is applied. This observation forces us to rethink the relationship between technology and culture. The internet and AI are not mere extensions of progress, but *forms of social organization* with direct effects on the notions of citizenship, sovereignty, authority, and truth.

The People's Republic of China demonstrates that it is possible to build a digital modernity without following traditional democratic paths. The fact that millions of users navigate a regulated internet every day, integrating algorithmic surveillance into their daily lives, shows that technology does not automatically produce a liberal culture.

A second essential lesson concerns the *relationship between the state and technology*. In the West, the mythology of startups has promoted the idea that innovation is born of absolute freedom, of minimal state interference. The People's Republic of China proposes a different paradigm: digital innovation supported, guided, and even strategically shaped by political authority. This approach is not without its costs, but it has proven remarkably effective in coordinating resources and accelerating digital industrialization processes (World Economic Forum, 2023). Thus, a new paradigm is emerging, in which democracies must reconsider the role of the state in supporting (or protecting) critical digital infrastructures without sacrificing the principles of openness and pluralism.

Perhaps the most uncomfortable lesson that the People's Republic of China teaches us is the vulnerability of democratic spaces to *algorithmic propaganda*. Contemporary disinformation is no longer built solely on fake news, but on the manipulation of the emotional architecture of the public space: what is amplified, what goes viral, what subtly disappears. Algorithms are not just mathematics; they are *forms of invisible power*. And in the absence of a digital culture based on critical thinking and information literacy, liberal democracies become fragile terrain, easily fragmented by subtle techniques that amplify existing divisions (Tufekci, 2017).

In this sense, the West needs not only stricter technical regulations (regarding data, privacy, or algorithmic transparency) but also *a new algorithmic and cultural programming of the digital space*. Without collective reflection on the values we want to preserve in the AI era, there is a risk that the virtual space will be colonized by organizational and narrative models that undermine the very basis of democratic order. Thus, the underlying lesson is simple but painful: *technology does not come from outside culture*. It is the continuation of a worldview, a tradition of understanding man, freedom, truth, and community. What is decided today in the architecture of platforms, in the logic of networks, and in the ways we regulate AI will define *who we will be* as a society, not just what we will be able to do as users of technology. Faced with this horizon, the West is called upon not only to regulate better but to think in more detail. It must be remembered that freedom, human dignity, and pluralism are not accidental products of technological progress, but *cultural achievements* that each generation must defend, reinvent, and inscribe in new forms of digital governance.

Conclusions: culture as the invisible infrastructure of technology

The Chinese digital reality and its global impact show with clarity that cannot be ignored: technology does not develop in a vacuum. Every algorithm, every platform, every data network takes on and amplifies the cultural values of the society in which it is created and applied. In the People's Republic of China, artificial intelligence has not become a disruptive factor, but a tool for strengthening the traditional social order. Linguistic models, surveillance systems, and communication networks—all reflect a vision of the world in which stability, collective harmony, and predictive control are essential priorities. The firewall is not just a technological tool; it is the expression of a way of conceiving the boundaries between inside and outside, between what must be protected and what can be allowed to penetrate. This cultural configuration, once expanded through the export of digital infrastructures and social media platforms, subtly changes the rules of the global information game. Not through brutal imposition, but through standardization, through adaptation to a different way of understanding the relationship between the individual, the community, and authority.

In light of this dynamic, questions become inevitable: *how can pluralism be protected in an algorithmic world? What kind of autonomy is possible when divergent cultural powers reshape the information space?* And, perhaps most importantly, *how can the role of culture in the governance of emerging technologies be rethought?* Analysis of the Chinese model warns us that *technology does not come with a guarantee of freedom*. If cultural values are not deliberately embedded in the technological infrastructure, they will be implicitly shaped by the logic of efficiency, control, or imposed stability. Understanding this does not mean rejecting innovation. Instead, it means recognizing that the digital future will not be determined solely by the ability to produce faster algorithms or denser networks, but by how we choose to define what matters: autonomy versus predictability, diversity versus homogenization, and freedom as risk versus stability as the norm.

In a world connected by code, culture remains the invisible infrastructure that supports or

undermines everything we build. Faced with this global reconfiguration, it is no longer enough to ask what technology can do for us; we must also ask what it does to us. In the People's Republic of China, code becomes heritage, and the algorithm takes over the function of ritual and tradition. The battle is no longer about innovation, but about interpretation. In a world where thinking is outsourced to neural networks and morality is translated into social scores, culture becomes the last echo of freedom.

Perhaps the real question is not *who wins the race for technological supremacy by developing the most powerful AI*, but *whose values are encoded in this AI, and what kind of world does it shape?* And the answer is subtly written in code. The AI era is the era in which lines of code become extensions of ideologies, and algorithms become filters of reality before we perceive it. It is the era in which the stakes are no longer just technological. They are existential. Because every neural network, every platform, every social trust score not only reflects a world, but creates it. And if we don't realize "what culture feeds artificial intelligence?", we risk soon living in a world governed by values we did not choose. And then it will no longer matter who was first, but who knew how to write the perfect cultural algorithm.

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