



Encoding Control, Decoding Resistance: State Power, Digital Media, and Identity Negotiation in Contemporary China

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Abstract

China's rapid digital transformation has created a media ecosystem where technological innovation is closely intertwined with state governance and ideological regulation. This study examines how digital media, state power, and audience agency interact to shape identity construction in China's digital public sphere. Employing a qualitative literature review with thematic analysis, the research synthesizes recent scholarship on digital governance, platform regulation, and audience reception. The analysis draws on Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model, Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality, and Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony. The findings reveal that China's digital infrastructure simultaneously expands communication while reinforcing state oversight through algorithms, platform governance, and content moderation. Audience responses are not homogeneous but include hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional readings shaped by social and cultural contexts. The study concludes that China's digital media environment is a dynamic arena where state institutions, platforms, and users continuously negotiate meaning and identity, extending debates on digital authoritarianism, media power, and political communication.

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Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed media ecosystems, political communication, and identity formation across the globe (Ge et al., 2024). Digital platforms have become central infrastructures through which information is produced, circulated, and consumed, profoundly reshaping relationships between governments, citizens, and public discourse (Seta, 2023; Jiang, 2024). While digital media are frequently associated with openness, participation, and democratized communication, recent scholarship has increasingly questioned these assumptions by demonstrating how digital technologies can also reinforce surveillance, platform governance, and new forms of political control (Cabestan, 2024; Harvey & Moore, 2023). Across both



democratic and authoritarian contexts, digital infrastructures have evolved beyond communication technologies into mechanisms through which states regulate information, construct public narratives, and shape collective identities (Cai et al., 2024; Dai et al., 2023). Consequently, the intersection of media, political power, and digital governance has emerged as one of the most significant debates within contemporary media and cultural studies, particularly in understanding how technological innovation simultaneously expands communicative opportunities while strengthening mechanisms of state authority.

China represents one of the most significant cases through which these transformations can be examined. As the world's largest digital society, China has developed an extensive digital ecosystem characterized by strong state regulation, domestic platform dominance, and rapid technological innovation. Platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, and Douyin function not merely as communication tools but as integrated socio-technical infrastructures embedded within systems of governance, commerce, and everyday social life (Seta, 2023; Jiang, 2024). State policies including the *Great Firewall*, algorithmic content governance, and platform regulation illustrate how digital infrastructures simultaneously facilitate economic modernization and regulate information flows (Hillman & Kou, 2024). Furthermore, the integration of artificial intelligence, big data, and digital public services, including smart-city initiatives and health-code systems, demonstrates how digital governance increasingly extends into everyday practices (Ge et al., 2024; Sun & Wang, 2022). Within this environment, digital media operate as spaces where communication, surveillance, participation, and ideological governance coexist, making China a particularly valuable case for examining the relationship between media technologies, political authority, and identity construction.

Existing scholarship on China's digital media landscape generally follows three dominant trajectories. The first emphasizes technological transformation, highlighting how digital platforms accelerate communication, reshape media consumption, and facilitate new forms of online interaction (Cai et al., 2024; Dai et al., 2023). Although these studies effectively explain China's rapid digital development, they frequently understate the institutional and political structures governing digital communication. A second body of research adopts a critical perspective by examining digital surveillance, censorship, algorithmic governance, and the expansion of state power through digital infrastructures (Baer & Dall'Agnola, 2025; Knox & Kurmanov, 2025). While these studies provide important insights into digital authoritarianism, they often portray users as passive subjects operating under an almost total system of control. A third strand focuses on digital literacy, technological adoption, and everyday media practices,

demonstrating how individuals engage with digital technologies across different social contexts (Mrisho & Dominic, 2023; Soßdorf et al., 2024). However, these perspectives rarely integrate questions of technological infrastructure, ideological governance, and audience interpretation into a single analytical framework. Consequently, the complex relationship between state power, media systems, and identity formation remains insufficiently theorized, particularly regarding how users actively negotiate meanings within politically regulated digital environments.

This study seeks to address these limitations by developing an integrated analytical framework that combines media studies, cultural studies, and critical social theory to examine the relationship between digital media, political power, and identity in contemporary China. Drawing upon Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model (1980), Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality (1991), and Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony (1971), this article argues that Chinese digital media should not be understood simply as instruments of state domination or as neutral technological platforms. Instead, they constitute dynamic arenas where meanings, identities, and power relations are continuously produced, negotiated, and contested. State institutions encode preferred ideological narratives through digital infrastructures and platform governance, yet audiences retain varying capacities to negotiate, reinterpret, or resist these meanings according to their own social experiences and cultural positions. By integrating technological, political, and cultural dimensions within a single framework, this study contributes to contemporary debates on digital authoritarianism, platform governance, media power, and identity formation while extending Hall's encoding/decoding theory beyond its conventional application in Western democratic societies.

Accordingly, this article addresses three interrelated research questions. First, how do China's digital infrastructures simultaneously facilitate communication and regulate information flows within the public sphere? Second, how do social characteristics and structural inequalities influence access to, participation in, and use of digital media? Third, how do state ideology and digital governance shape the ways citizens interpret, negotiate, and construct identities through everyday digital media practices? Addressing these questions enables a more comprehensive understanding of the interaction between digital technologies, political authority, and audience agency in contemporary China. The remainder of this article is organized into five sections: the methodology, followed by discussions on digital infrastructure and information governance, social inequality and differentiated digital participation, ideological governance and identity construction, audience

reception and meaning negotiation, and finally the broader implications of these findings for media, power, and digital society in authoritarian contexts.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative literature review approach to examine the relationship between digital media, state power, and identity formation in contemporary China. A qualitative design is appropriate because it facilitates an interpretive understanding of complex political, cultural, and technological phenomena by synthesizing diverse scholarly perspectives rather than measuring causal relationships (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a document-based inquiry, the study critically reviews academic literature to construct an integrated analytical framework explaining how digital infrastructures, state governance, and audience practices interact within China's digital ecosystem (Bowen, 2009). This approach further enables an *emic* understanding of digital media practices by considering how they are experienced and interpreted within China's distinctive political and socio-cultural context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

The literature search was conducted systematically using Scopus, Google Scholar, and JSTOR. Search keywords included combinations of *China digital media*, *Chinese internet governance*, *Great Firewall*, *WeChat*, *Weibo*, *digital surveillance China*, *encoding/decoding*, *governmentality*, *hegemony*, and *digital identity China*. To ensure scholarly quality and contemporary relevance, the review focused primarily on peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, policy reports, and institutional publications published between 2010 and 2025, while foundational theoretical works by Hall (1980), Foucault (1991), and Gramsci (1971) were retained because of their continuing conceptual significance. Sources were selected according to four criteria: (1) discussing digital media, internet governance, or state-media relations in China; (2) addressing power, identity, or audience reception within digital environments; (3) originating from reputable academic or institutional publishers; and (4) being published in English. Publications lacking scholarly credibility or unrelated to China's digital context were excluded.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). The analytical process consisted of three sequential stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. During data reduction, relevant literature was identified, screened, and coded according to the research objectives. The coded findings were subsequently organized into three analytical themes: (1) Digital Infrastructure and the Architecture of Information Control; (2) Social Inequality and Differentiated Access; and (3) State Ideology and Identity Construction. The final stage synthesized relationships among these themes

through Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding framework, Michel Foucault's concept of Governmentality, and Antonio Gramsci's theory of Hegemony to explain how power is exercised not only through coercion but also through normalization, ideological consent, and audience negotiation within China's digital media environment. To strengthen the credibility of the findings, the study employed both source triangulation, by comparing evidence from journal articles, books, and policy reports, and theoretical triangulation by integrating complementary theoretical perspectives. This methodological strategy enables a comprehensive interpretation of the interaction between digital media, political authority, and identity formation while contributing to broader debates on digital authoritarianism, platform governance, and media power.

Table 1
Data Analysis Procedures

Stage	Analytical Process	Application in This Study
1. Data Reduction	Literature selection and coding	Selecting literature on digital media, internet governance, state control, social inequality, and identity formation in China
2. Data Display	Theme development and organization	Organizing findings into three themes: (1) Digital Infrastructure and Information Control; (2) Social Inequality and Differentiated Access; (3) State Ideology and Identity Construction
3. Conclusion Drawing	Critical interpretation and synthesis	Explaining how power operates through coercion, normalization, and negotiated meaning using Hall's <i>Encoding/Decoding</i> , Foucault's <i>Governmentality</i> , and Gramsci's <i>Hegemony</i>
Trustworthiness	Source and theoretical triangulation	Source triangulation: journal articles, books, and policy reports. Theoretical triangulation: Hall's <i>Encoding/Decoding</i> , Foucault's <i>Governmentality</i> , and Gramsci's <i>Hegemony</i> .

Source: Developed by the author based on [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#), [Creswell and Poth \(2018\)](#), and [Snyder \(2019\)](#).

The analytical framework presented in [Table 1](#) summarizes the three stages of thematic analysis employed in this study. The first stage focuses on identifying and coding literature relevant to digital governance, media power, and identity formation in China. The second stage organizes the coded evidence into three interrelated analytical themes that guide the discussion. Finally, the third stage synthesizes these themes through Hall's, Foucault's, and Gramsci's theoretical perspectives to explain how digital media simultaneously function as infrastructures of communication, mechanisms of governance, and sites of ideological negotiation. By combining systematic literature review with source and theoretical triangulation, this methodological approach provides a rigorous

and theoretically grounded understanding of the interplay between digital media, political power, and identity in contemporary China.

Digital Infrastructure and the Architecture of Information Control in China

China's digital transformation demonstrates that technological advancement does not necessarily lead to greater political openness or democratic communication. Instead, China has developed a distinctive model in which digital technologies function simultaneously as engines of economic modernization and instruments of state governance. Unlike liberal approaches that emphasize market-driven regulation and decentralized communication, China's digital ecosystem is organized around strong state coordination, integrating communication technologies into broader objectives of economic development, social stability, and ideological management (Seta, 2023; Jiang, 2024). Within this framework, the principle of *digital sovereignty* enables the state to retain authority over cyberspace while fostering domestic technological innovation. Consequently, China's experience challenges the assumption that digitalization inevitably promotes political liberalization, illustrating instead that technological progress can coexist with highly centralized systems of governance.

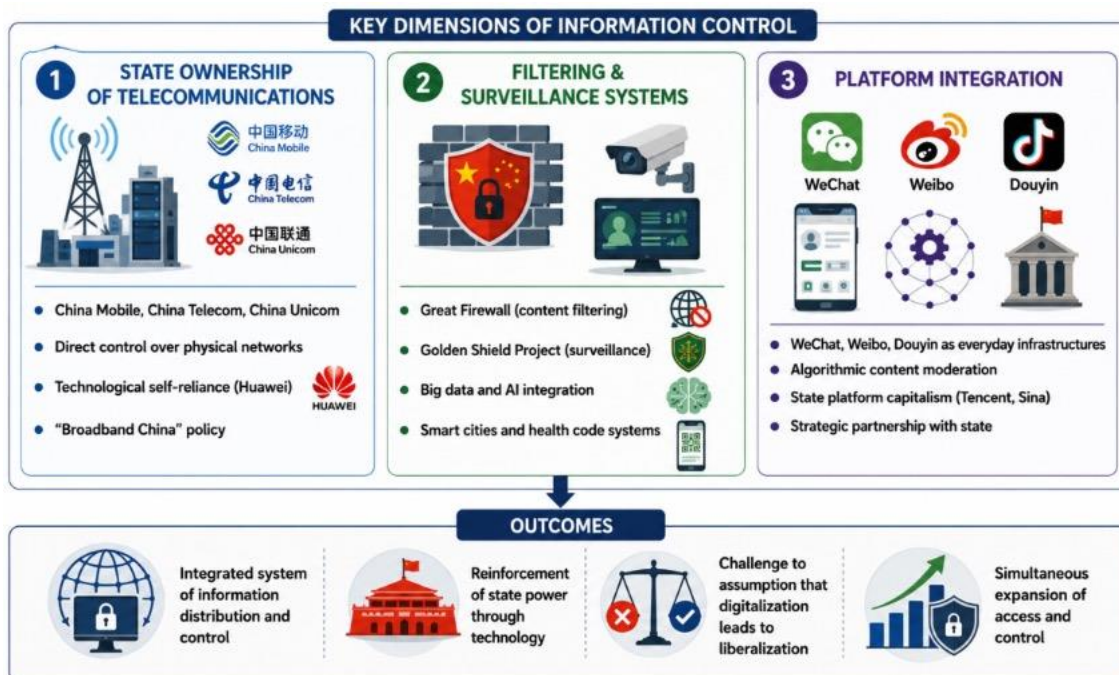
This governance model is supported by extensive state ownership and regulation of digital infrastructure. Major telecommunications providers, including China Mobile, China Telecom, and China Unicom, remain under government control, allowing authorities to oversee both communication networks and data flows (Jiang, 2024). Long-term industrial strategies, such as the *Broadband China* initiative and support for national technology firms like Huawei, have significantly expanded broadband access, mobile connectivity, and digital services across the country (Seta, 2023). However, this expansion has been accompanied by increasingly sophisticated mechanisms of surveillance and information management. Systems such as the *Great Firewall*, the *Golden Shield Project*, algorithmic content moderation, and artificial intelligence enable the state to monitor, filter, and regulate online communication while maintaining extensive digital connectivity (Dong et al., 2024; Meng et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2025). As a result, technological development and information control have evolved as complementary rather than contradictory processes.

This integration is further reinforced through domestic platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, and Douyin, which combine communication, financial services, and public administration within a regulated digital ecosystem. Through algorithmic governance and platform regulation, these technologies shape information visibility and public participation while supporting state

objectives. China's digital transformation therefore represents a form of networked governance in which technological innovation, platform development, and political authority operate in mutually reinforcing ways, demonstrating that digital infrastructures can simultaneously expand connectivity and strengthen state control over information and public discourse. The figure below illustrates the integrated architecture of China's digital governance by identifying three interconnected dimensions.

Figure 1

Digital Infrastructure and the Architecture of Information Control in China



Source: Developed by the author based on Jiang (2024), Seta (2023), Hillman and Kou (2024), Rolf and Schindler (2023), Ge et al. (2024), Sun and Wang (2022), and thematic analysis of the literature.

Beyond physical infrastructure, China's model relies on an extensive architecture of digital regulation. The Great Firewall filters politically sensitive information through mechanisms such as IP blocking, DNS manipulation, and deep packet inspection, while the Golden Shield Project integrates surveillance databases that enable authorities to monitor online activities across multiple governmental institutions (Dinh & Nguyen, 2024; Jiang, 2024). Information governance is further embedded within everyday digital platforms. Applications such as WeChat, Weibo, and Douyin have become indispensable infrastructures for communication, financial transactions, public services, and social interaction, allowing regulatory authority to operate through algorithmic content moderation and platform governance rather than relying solely on direct

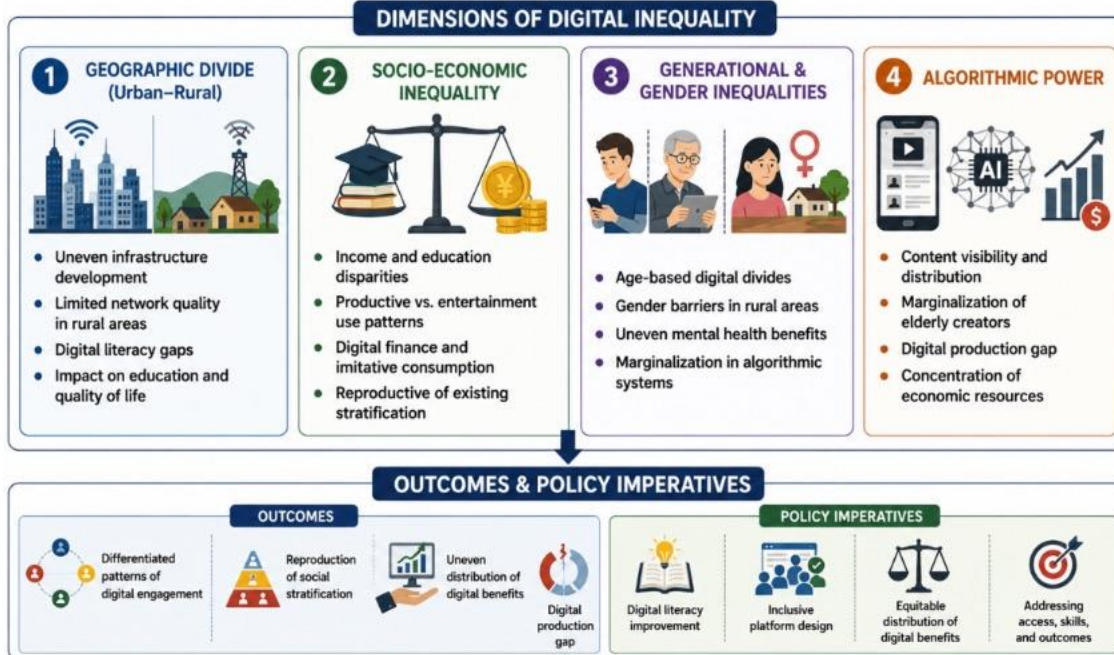
ensorship (Seta, 2023). Within this ecosystem, technology companies including Tencent and Sina function not merely as commercial enterprises but also as strategic partners that align platform governance with national regulatory objectives, reflecting what scholars describe as state platform capitalism (Rolf & Schindler, 2023).

The integration of artificial intelligence, big data analytics, and smart governance further extends state authority into everyday social practices. Applications such as the health code system, introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic, and broader smart city initiatives demonstrate how surveillance technologies, predictive analytics, and administrative services have become deeply embedded within citizens' daily lives (Ge et al., 2024; Sun & Wang, 2022). Rather than functioning exclusively as instruments of censorship, these technologies constitute a comprehensive system of digital governance in which communication, data collection, public administration, and social regulation operate through interconnected technological infrastructures. As illustrated in Figure 1, China's digital ecosystem integrates infrastructure ownership, algorithmic governance, platform regulation, and data-driven surveillance into a unified model of information management. This integrated architecture demonstrates that digitalization is not inherently associated with liberalization but can equally reinforce political authority, reshape public communication, and redefine the relationship between technology, power, and society in the contemporary digital era.

Social Inequality and Differentiated Access in China's Digital Media Ecosystem

China's rapid digital transformation has substantially expanded access to digital technologies and online media, yet these developments have not been experienced equally across society. Rather than eliminating inequality, digitalization has generated new forms of social differentiation shaped by disparities in digital skills, patterns of media use, and the unequal distribution of digital benefits. Recent scholarship conceptualizes the digital divide as extending beyond physical access to encompass differences in digital competencies and social outcomes (Lin et al., 2025). Consequently, digital inequality in China should be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon produced through the interaction of geographic location, socio-economic status, age, gender, and algorithmic governance. These intersecting dimensions determine not only who can access digital technologies but also who benefits from participation in China's rapidly evolving digital economy. The figure below illustrates how Social Inequality and Differentiated Access in China's Digital Media Ecosystem.

Figure 2
Social Inequality and Differentiated Access in China's Digital Media Ecosystem



Source: Developed by the author based on [Lin et al. \(2025\)](#), [Li & Chen \(2025\)](#), [Wang et al. \(2023\)](#), [Li & Liu \(2025\)](#), [Zhang \(2025\)](#), [Yang et al. \(2024\)](#), [Zhao \(2025\)](#), [Wang & Wang \(2024\)](#), [Schradié & Bekirsky \(2021\)](#), and [Hollimon et al. \(2025\)](#).

Figure 2 presents a conceptual framework illustrating four interrelated dimensions of digital inequality: geographic disparities, socio-economic differences, generational and gender inequalities, and algorithmic power. Together, these dimensions explain how unequal access and participation produce differentiated patterns of digital engagement and social outcomes within China's digital ecosystem.

The first dimension concerns the persistent urban-rural divide. Although China has invested heavily in expanding broadband infrastructure, significant disparities remain in network quality, digital literacy, and institutional support between urban and rural communities. Rural populations frequently encounter limited opportunities to develop digital competencies necessary for education, employment, and public participation, restricting their capacity to convert digital connectivity into broader social mobility ([Li & Chen, 2025](#); [Shou et al., 2024](#)). These inequalities are further reinforced by the concentration of digital industries, technological innovation, and economic opportunities in metropolitan centers such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen, leaving peripheral regions relatively disadvantaged. Digital inequality is also closely associated with socio-economic status. Individuals possessing higher levels of education,

income, and professional resources are generally more likely to utilize digital technologies for productive purposes, including knowledge acquisition, networking, entrepreneurship, and career development. By contrast, lower-income groups tend to engage predominantly in entertainment-oriented digital activities, limiting the socioeconomic returns derived from digital participation. The rapid expansion of digital finance illustrates this paradox. While digital financial services have broadened access to credit and financial inclusion, they have simultaneously encouraged patterns of imitative consumption among economically vulnerable populations, potentially reinforcing existing economic inequalities (Zhang, 2025). This reflects the broader phenomenon of the digital production gap, whereby digital technologies generate unequal opportunities for value creation rather than simply unequal access.

A third dimension involves generational and gender inequalities. Younger generations generally adapt more rapidly to emerging digital technologies, whereas older adults often face barriers related to digital literacy, platform usability, and access to reliable information. Although internet use has been shown to improve psychological well-being and social connectedness among older adults, these benefits remain unevenly distributed, particularly across rural communities (Yang et al., 2024). Gender disparities further complicate these patterns. Women, especially those living in rural areas, continue to encounter structural obstacles that limit both access to digital resources and opportunities for meaningful digital participation (Wang & Wang, 2024). These inequalities extend beyond technology consumption to digital production itself, where algorithmic recommendation systems frequently privilege commercially successful creators while marginalizing elderly users, women, and individuals with limited digital capital (Li & Lu, 2025).

Beyond demographic characteristics, algorithmic governance has emerged as an increasingly important source of digital inequality. Contemporary digital platforms no longer function solely as communication infrastructures but also as gatekeepers that determine the visibility, circulation, and economic value of digital content. Recommendation algorithms influence whose voices become visible, which narratives receive amplification, and which users gain economic opportunities within platform economies. As a result, inequalities are reproduced not only through differences in technological access but also through unequal participation in digital content production and public discourse (Schradié & Bekirsky, 2021; Mellor, 2023). Similar disparities are evident within digital health services, where individuals possessing limited digital literacy often experience difficulties accessing healthcare information and online medical services, thereby widening existing health inequalities (Chen & Ye, 2025; Gong et

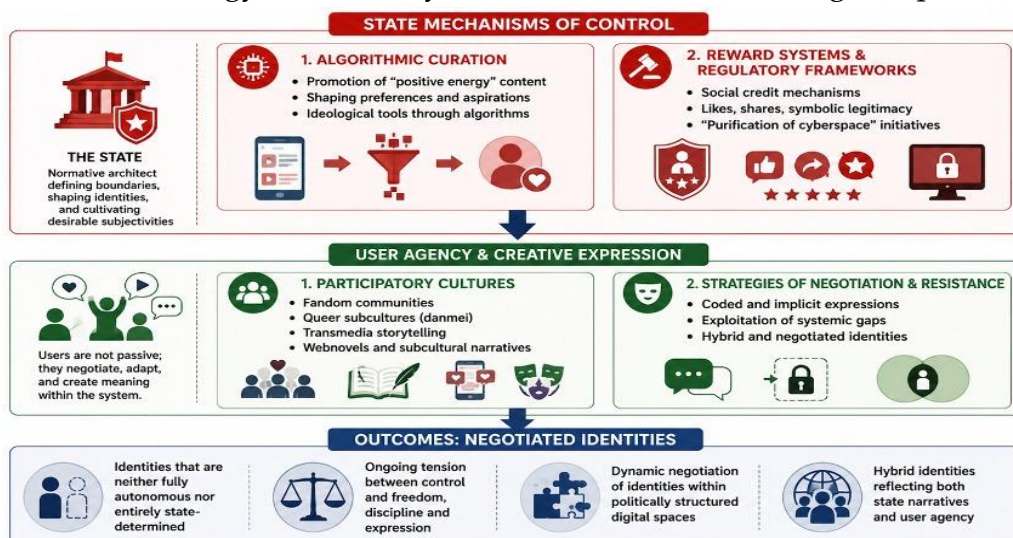
al., 2024). Figure 2 demonstrates that digital inequality in China cannot be explained solely by infrastructure gaps. Rather, it emerges from the interaction of social, economic, demographic, and algorithmic factors that collectively shape opportunities for digital participation and knowledge production. Addressing these inequalities therefore requires more than expanding internet connectivity. It also demands policies that strengthen digital literacy, promote inclusive platform governance, reduce algorithmic bias, and ensure a more equitable distribution of digital opportunities across different social groups (Hollimon et al., 2025; Hu et al., 2025). Through such measures, digital transformation can contribute not only to technological modernization but also to more inclusive forms of social development.

State Ideology and Identity Construction in the Digital Space

The relationship between digital media and identity formation in contemporary China cannot be separated from the role of the state as the primary architect of digital governance. Rather than functioning as a neutral environment for communication, China's digital ecosystem operates as a politically structured space where technological infrastructures, regulatory institutions, and ideological narratives collectively shape how identities are produced, expressed, and recognized. State governance extends beyond conventional censorship by actively cultivating normative values through algorithmic curation, platform regulation, and digital participation. Consequently, identity formation within China's digital sphere emerges from the continuous interaction between institutional authority and user practices, reflecting an ongoing negotiation between political regulation and individual agency.

Figure 3

State Ideology and Identity Construction in China's Digital Space



Source: Developed by the author based on Foucault (1991), Gramsci (1971), Adams (2022, 2023), Zheng (2024), and Ren (2023).

Figure 3 illustrates the conceptual relationship between state mechanisms of ideological governance, user agency, and the emergence of negotiated identities. The framework demonstrates that identity formation results neither from unilateral state domination nor from unrestricted individual autonomy, but from continuous interaction between institutional regulation and participatory digital practices. At the center of this process are state mechanisms of ideological governance. The Chinese government employs algorithmic curation, content moderation, regulatory frameworks, and symbolic reward systems to promote narratives consistent with socialist values and political stability. Platforms such as Douyin, WeChat, and Weibo prioritize *zheng nengliang* (positive energy) content through recommendation algorithms that influence not only information visibility but also users' aspirations, preferences, and self-presentation (Adams, 2022). These algorithmic systems are complemented by broader initiatives, including cyberspace governance campaigns and social credit mechanisms, that encourage citizens to internalize officially endorsed norms. Rather than relying exclusively on coercion, digital governance increasingly operates through incentives, visibility, and symbolic recognition, making ideological conformity appear voluntary within everyday digital interactions.

This dynamic can be interpreted through Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality, which explains how modern power functions by shaping conduct rather than merely imposing prohibitions (Foucault, 1991). Within China's digital environment, governance seeks to produce disciplined digital citizens who willingly reproduce state-endorsed values through routine online practices. Educational campaigns, media messaging, and platform design collectively normalize acceptable forms of expression, reducing the need for overt repression. As a result, digital technologies function simultaneously as communication infrastructures and as mechanisms through which political authority is embedded in everyday social life.

Despite extensive regulatory control, digital space also remains a site of user agency and cultural negotiation. From a Gramscian perspective, hegemony is sustained not solely through domination but through continuous negotiation between political authority and social actors (Gramsci, 1971). Participatory cultures, including fandom communities, online literary platforms, transmedia storytelling, and *danmei* subcultures, illustrate how users reinterpret dominant narratives while adapting to regulatory constraints. Rather than openly confronting censorship, creators frequently employ indirect language,

symbolic coding, satire, and creative ambiguity to communicate alternative meanings (Zheng, 2024). These adaptive strategies demonstrate that digital governance does not eliminate agency but reshapes the forms through which resistance and creativity are expressed.

The continuing expansion of web novels, online fan communities, and virtual platforms further reinforces this negotiated character of identity construction. As Ren (2023) argues, digital literary platforms provide relatively flexible environments where diverse cultural identities and subcultural narratives continue to emerge despite regulatory oversight. New technologies, including immersive virtual environments and metaverse platforms, expand opportunities for identity experimentation while simultaneously embedding users within algorithmically governed ecosystems (Adams, 2023). Consequently, digital identities are neither entirely autonomous nor fully determined by state institutions. Instead, they evolve through continuous adaptation to technological architectures, ideological expectations, and community interactions.

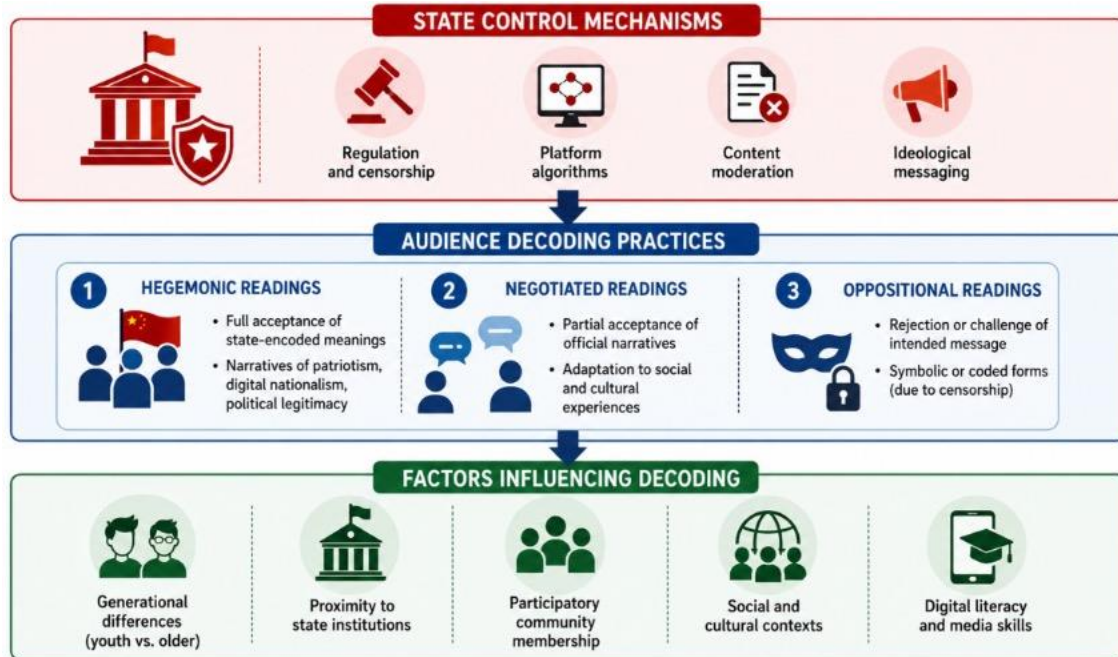
As illustrated in Figure 3, identity construction in China's digital ecosystem is best understood as a dialectical process linking state ideology, technological infrastructures, and user practices. The state establishes normative boundaries through algorithms, regulations, and symbolic incentives, while users continuously negotiate, reinterpret, and occasionally challenge these boundaries through participatory digital cultures. The resulting identities are therefore negotiated identities, dynamic social formations characterized by ongoing interaction between political authority, technological mediation, and individual creativity. This perspective moves beyond simplistic dichotomies of authoritarian control versus digital freedom, demonstrating instead that China's digital media environment constitutes a complex arena in which ideology, technology, and cultural agency are constantly co-produced.

Negotiating State Narratives: Audience Reception of Government-Controlled Digital Media in China

The relationship between state-controlled media and audience interpretation in contemporary China demonstrates that ideological communication is far more dynamic than a simple model of propaganda and compliance. Although the Chinese state exercises extensive control through regulation, censorship, platform governance, and algorithmic curation, audiences continue to actively interpret, negotiate, and occasionally resist official narratives. Consequently, digital media should not be understood merely as instruments of state domination but as contested communicative spaces where political authority and

audience agency interact in the continuous production of meaning. This finding challenges deterministic perspectives that portray digital authoritarianism as either completely suppressing public agency or inevitably collapsing under technological openness.

Figure 4
Audience Reception of Government-Controlled Digital Media in China



Source: Developed by the author based on [Hall \(1980\)](#), [Sun \(2022\)](#), [Xu \(2023\)](#), [Xiao \(2023\)](#), [Li et al. \(2023\)](#), [Mega & Pratisara \(2023\)](#), and [Zheng \(2024\)](#).

Figure 4 presents a conceptual model illustrating how state control mechanisms interact with audience decoding practices to produce diverse interpretive outcomes. The framework demonstrates that media reception in China's digital ecosystem is shaped not only by state regulation but also by social context, cultural experience, and users' interpretive capacities. At the structural level, the Chinese state regulates digital communication through an integrated system comprising legal regulation, content moderation, algorithmic recommendation, and ideological messaging. These mechanisms establish the boundaries within which information circulates and influence the visibility of particular narratives while constraining alternative viewpoints. However, controlling information distribution does not automatically determine how audiences interpret that information. Consistent with Stuart [Hall's](#) Encoding/Decoding model ([1980](#)), media messages remain open to multiple interpretations because audiences actively construct meaning according to their social positions, cultural experiences, and ideological orientations.

The findings indicate that audience responses generally fall into three interconnected decoding positions. The first is the hegemonic reading, in which audiences largely accept meanings encoded by the state, particularly narratives emphasizing patriotism, national development, political stability, and digital nationalism (Li et al., 2023; Xu, 2023). Such interpretations are more frequently observed among individuals closely connected to state institutions or those whose social experiences reinforce official political narratives. The second and most prevalent position is the negotiated reading. Rather than fully accepting or rejecting official discourse, audiences selectively appropriate state narratives while adapting them to their own social realities and everyday experiences (Sun, 2022; Mega & Pratisara, 2023). Within China's highly regulated digital environment, many users recognize the legitimacy of certain state objectives, such as economic development or social stability, while simultaneously expressing concerns regarding censorship, platform governance, or restrictions on public expression. This negotiated position illustrates that ideological acceptance is rarely absolute but continually mediated through lived experience and cultural context.

The third position consists of oppositional readings, although these rarely appear as direct confrontation because of extensive digital surveillance and content moderation. Instead, resistance is commonly expressed through indirect communication strategies, including satire, coded language, memes, symbolic references, and alternative cultural narratives circulating within online communities (Xiao, 2023; Zheng, 2024). Such practices demonstrate that audiences maintain interpretive agency even within tightly regulated digital environments by adapting their modes of expression to existing political constraints. Beyond these three classical decoding positions, China's digital ecosystem also generates more nuanced forms of interpretation. Participatory communities, including fandom networks, gaming communities, online literature, and subcultural groups, often produce reflective, strategic, and symbolic readings that cannot be fully captured by Hall's original typology. Rather than openly opposing state narratives, these communities negotiate meaning through creative reinterpretation, irony, and collaborative cultural production, illustrating that digital participation simultaneously reproduces and reshapes dominant ideological discourses. This finding suggests that contemporary authoritarian digital environments require an expanded understanding of audience reception beyond traditional binary distinctions between acceptance and resistance.

As illustrated in Figure 4, audience interpretation is further influenced by multiple contextual factors, including generational differences, educational

background, proximity to state institutions, participation in digital communities, and levels of digital literacy. Younger users generally demonstrate greater interpretive flexibility and are more likely to engage in negotiated or symbolically oppositional readings, whereas audiences embedded within official institutions tend to reproduce hegemonic interpretations. These variations confirm that digital audiences in China are socially heterogeneous rather than ideologically uniform. Overall, [Figure 4](#) demonstrates that audience reception within China's digital ecosystem constitutes a continuous process of meaning negotiation rather than passive ideological consumption. State institutions retain significant influence through platform governance, algorithms, and regulatory mechanisms, yet audiences simultaneously exercise agency by interpreting, adapting, and occasionally contesting official narratives. This interaction produces a complex communicative environment in which power operates not solely through domination but through ongoing negotiation between political authority, technological infrastructures, and audience interpretation. By extending Hall's Encoding/Decoding framework to the context of digital authoritarianism, this analysis contributes to broader debates in media and cultural studies concerning platform governance, audience agency, and the evolving relationship between media, power, and identity in contemporary digital societies.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the relationship between digital media, state power, and identity formation in China is far more dynamic than the binary narrative of authoritarian control versus technological liberation. Rather than producing uniform ideological compliance, China's digital ecosystem generates diverse patterns of audience reception, including hegemonic acceptance, negotiated interpretation, and symbolic resistance. These findings indicate that state power operates not only through censorship and surveillance but also through algorithmic governance, platform regulation, and the normalization of political values within everyday digital practices. By integrating Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model with Foucault's concept of governmentality and Gramsci's theory of hegemony, this study argues that digital communication in China constitutes an ongoing process of meaning negotiation in which political authority, technological infrastructures, and audience agency continuously interact. The study therefore contributes to media and cultural studies by extending discussions of digital authoritarianism beyond deterministic assumptions and demonstrating that ideological hegemony is reproduced through both institutional control and active audience interpretation.

Despite these contributions, the study is limited by its reliance on qualitative literature synthesis and therefore cannot fully capture the everyday experiences of Chinese digital media users. Future research should employ empirical approaches, including digital ethnography, interviews, and computational analyses, to examine how artificial intelligence, recommendation algorithms, and emerging platform ecosystems increasingly shape identity construction and audience reception. Comparative studies involving China and other digitally governed societies would also enrich understanding of how political institutions, technological infrastructures, and cultural contexts interact in different settings. Ultimately, this study concludes that digital media in authoritarian contexts should be understood as contested spaces where control, participation, adaptation, and resistance coexist. Even within highly regulated digital environments, audiences retain interpretive agency, negotiate official narratives, and construct identities through culturally situated and technologically mediated communication practices, offering broader insights into the evolving relationship between media, power, and society in the digital age.

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Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Ethical Approval

This study is a literature review based exclusively on secondary data from published academic journals, official reports, and policy documents. It does not involve primary data collection from human subjects, animals, or any form of direct intervention. Therefore, ethical approval was not required for this research.

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