

Through a Chinese Lens: Tech, Culture, and Innovation in Shanghai and Hangzhou

Introduction

I am really grateful to participate in the reading week tour for the course “Web3.0 and Social Impact” to Shanghai and Hangzhou and visit some of China’s best universities and corporates regarding latest technological developments and regulatory trends. In our short two-day stay in Shanghai, the group was able to visit Shanghai Jiao Tong University and attend lectures given by esteemed professors and local students on AI governance issues. We also visited the headquarters of SenseTime, an AI company with Hong Kong background, to get a glimpse on their pioneer products and services. We later spent three days in Hangzhou to engage with students and academics from Zhejiang University, converse with tech regulators and government officials, as well as conduct site visits to big techs like Ant Finance and Alibaba. In this reflection, I will recap the learning experience throughout the trip and elaborate on the key takeaways. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Dr. Chan, Linda, Dr. Choi, and all the partners for their interesting insights and generous support throughout the journey.



The Three Key takeaways

AI as a Governing Tool

In Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Mr. Yuming Yuan, fellow from the China-BRICS AI Development and Cooperation Center, delivered a lecture about using “AI to Empower Global Sustainable Development”. One of the key concepts that Mr. Yuan mentioned is how countries in the world adopt distinct approaches towards AI, namely Development, Safety and Governance. For instance, from the GenAI perspective, the American model largely focusses on developing the quickest and most scalable LLM possible, with lots of research effort focused on maximizing the commercial value of this technology. On the other hand, European nations and companies

emphasize a lot more on safety, a.k.a. the precautionary aspect of the technology. This can be seen from the European Union's AI act and GDPR, which provides a comprehensive standard to regulate the use of such cutting-edge technology. In the Chinese context, however, a lot of emphasis is placed on governance, i.e. the use of technology in state control for national power and social stability. Mr. Yuan's presentation echoes with what Professor Zhang Yanhua (Zhejiang University's Department of Information Resource Management) discussed regarding how Chinese technology is hugely centered in applications for public usage, rather than in an industrial or corporate setting.

With such a governance mindset, it is no surprise when I see the overwhelming proliferation of technology and tools used to manage urban areas and ensure public safety. I am particularly impressed by the SenseFoundry dashboard we see in SenseTime, which is essentially a software that monitors public spaces through the assistance of 20,000 cameras in the vibrant Shanghai city. This Smart City tool is able to detect fire hazard, identify illegal occupants, implement security checks and more. The City Brain company in Hangzhou exceeds this by monitoring urban society through digital twin technology and AI analytics to enhance neighborhood cohesion and urban governance.

Such kinds of technology surprised and terrified me at the same time. On one hand, these all-in-one platforms can detect emergencies instantly and alert authorities, enabling a rapid response that boosts government efficiency. On the other hand, such systems often collect personal data without clear justification or guidelines, raising significant concerns about data privacy and mass surveillance. The ethical dilemma between privacy and security is one of the most frequent topics that appeared in my head when I was visiting these corporates and attending the lectures. It is just interesting to see how China is pivoting so much from the western world in AI usage and has been extremely successful due to its authoritarian political model. Growing up as a local in Hong Kong and being influenced by both Chinese and western values, this trip to China really broadened my horizons in understanding the actual Chinese perspective in technology governance.

1. 数字浙江建设的发展历程与主要特点 (the evolving history & key features)

■ 主要特点 (Key features)

“七个一”

- “一切为人民” (All for the People)
- “一张蓝图”绘到底 (One Blueprint Through to the End)
- “一省”顶层设计 (The Whole-of-Province Design)
- “一把手”工程 (A top-leader Project)
- “一体化”数据治理 (Integrated Data Governance)
- “一站式”数字交付 (One-Stop Digital Delivery)
- “一直不停”的迭代升级 (Continuous Iterative Upgrades)

Big Tech v.s. Social Good

Before this trip, my impression towards big tech is always kind of negative, with its sole purpose to drive profit and maximize shareholder value. They lack spiritual soul and social touch but somehow, we rely on them the most in our everyday life. This echoes with our course's title, "Web3.0 and Social Impact". Is it possible to strike a balance between earning profit and driving social innovation? Does creating social impact necessarily mean giving up scalability? If social innovation is an NGO-only privilege, then what's the role of big techs? These questions kept me pondering throughout the trip, and it was fortunate that I got all my answers in the company visits.

I was quite impressed when I saw these large corporates dedicated a whole section in the tours explaining their social innovation initiatives. What struck me most was the story of Alibaba co-developing an alert platform with China's Ministry of Public Security to locate missing children. The "Reunion" system has found more than 4,000 children since 2016 and now covers nearly 50 apps in China, from Baidu to QQ. As one of China's largest tech companies, Alibaba places a huge emphasis on risk management, AI governance and social innovation, a commitment that is clearly reflected in how it leverages its technological capabilities to act in socially responsible ways. The visit to Ant Finance headquarters is also worth mentioning, especially on how they ingrain social innovation concepts in their products and services. For instance, their pioneer AQ app hosts AI doctor agents trained with healthcare models to provide patients with accurate and trustworthy medical advice. The company also developed an AI avatar kiosk that can be placed in hospitals and medical centers to rehumanize digital interaction. All of these measures reflect Ant Finance's ability and willingness to address social needs with technology by improving users' health and well-being.

In my humble opinion, all businesses have a responsibility to act ethically. Large tech companies, with their vast technical expertise and resources, have a further obligation to drive social innovation for a better world. This is often easier said than done, yet the Chinese examples prove that great progress begins with baby steps and social good could often be achieved with collaborative effort from corporates and the government.



Hong Kong's Future (Mine as well ☺)

One of the biggest takeaways from this trip is definitely how Hong Kong can learn from these tier 1 cities that are at the technology forefront in China and the world. In recent years, the Western world's perception of Hong Kong's role as a strategic intermediary between China and the globe has shifted. The city, boasted as a top “International Financial Centre” and “Geopolitical Neutral Zone” in the past decades, is no longer the best place to conduct business from the western perspective, given the mass relocation of international institutions due to political and economic reasons. Against this background, how can Hong Kong maintain its reputation or even develop new comparative advantage in the ever-changing geopolitical environment?

The speech from 陳思聰, a HKU graduate doing business in the Yuhang district, provided some interesting insights to the question above. He explicitly mentioned how Hong Kong, HKU in particular, equipped him with global insights and strategic thinking. With years of expertise in the healthcare sector, Mr. Chan firmly believes Hong Kong is still the eccentric bridge between China and the globe. Everything he says sounds like propaganda at first, but after visiting all these top universities and companies, as well as interacting with locals, I finally found the niche that Hong Kong, or me as a Hong Konger, can offer. The sheer scale of China's population allows its citizen to adopt a protectionist approach when the domestic economy is self-sufficient and reliance on foreign investment and infrastructure is less important compared to other smaller countries. With this in mind, it comes as no surprise when most of the mainland Chinese I met in the trip, from ordinary citizens to Big Tech employees and even academics, are not proficient or unwilling to converse in English – the international language. I argue that learning the common language is vital for international dialogue and fostering innovation, but apparently the Chinese government has a distinct national direction in its education system. With our biliterate and trilingual skills, Hong Kong and its citizens remain a springboard into China and a breeding ground for global interaction. I am quite an optimist for Hong Kong's (and my) future, especially the increasing proximity to China that offers us unlimited opportunities.



Side notes

A huge shoutout to all my course mates for making this trip enjoyable and fruitful. Everyone is really open-minded and supportive with the aim to understand technology governance in the social context. With students coming from a diverse and international background, I particularly cherished our informal discussions over casual meals, or during commutes. Our conversations spanned a wide spectrum—comparing authoritarian and democratic models, debating recent international AI developments, exploring startup cultures across the globe, or simply reflecting on cultural differences in all aspects of life. I will truly treasure these moments, as it is rare to find such a multicultural, philosophical and inquisitive group in any other courses. Once again, I would like to thank everyone for making the trip possible and it really broadened my horizons in the intersection between technology and social impact.

